

**IDENTITY PRESENTATION IN STORIES OF PAST AND PRESENT: AN ANALYSIS
OF MEMOIRS BY AUTHORS OF THE 1.5 GENERATION OF VIETNAMESE
AMERICANS**

BY

Thanh Hai Cao

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Cheryl B. Lester, PhD.

Chairperson

Committee members: _____

Maryemma Graham, PhD.

Giselle Anatol, PhD.

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The Thesis Committee for Thanh Hai Cao certifies
that this is the approved Version of the following thesis:

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how authors of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans represent their identity in their memoirs.¹ The analysis shows that the condition under which each author came to the United States, either as an anticipatory or an acute refugee, influences the way each memoir is constructed in terms of timeline and content. In particular, this study shows that the authors choose different themes such as conversion, imagined space and food to talk about the process of adaptation in the new world. Along with the themes, either linear or disruptive timeline is deployed as a way to represent their refugee condition. Together, they constitute a diverse and unique identity representation of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans.

¹ Created by scholars of post 1965 immigrants, 1.5 generation is used to refer to immigrants who were born in a different country and came to the U.S at their early age. However, it still is a controversial concept in terms of what age span it should cover. For example, in their study, Zhou and Bankston (1998) classify foreign-born children arriving between 5 and 12 years of age as 1.5 generation children and those arriving as adolescents as first generation children. Meanwhile, Rumbaut's definition of the 1.5 generation included those arriving at adolescence. I tend to follow Rumbaut's classification because there is a qualitative difference between those who arrive as adolescents and those who arrive as adults (classified as first generation). Also, I use the term 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans to refer only to the people who arrived in the U.S right after the fall of Saigon in 1975 and during the 1980s and 90s (boat people). In my opinion, only those who had to suffer from the war and its aftermath in Vietnam and from the pressure of the dominant culture in the U.S are really 1.5ers. People arriving later, who qualify Rumbaut's classification in terms of age, are not considered as 1.5ers in my research because they came from a united and peaceful Vietnam and arrived in a different U.S. with much more tolerance towards immigrants' cultures.

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INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Hue, Vietnam after the America-Vietnam war was a defining experience for me, which helps shape my interest in Vietnamese Americans. Because Hue used to belong to the American-supported Southern Government, the city physically and mentally bears the relics of the war and the existence of the faraway America.² As a little girl, I would see street vendors purchasing war scrap, look at amputated veterans in the streets and hear songs celebrating Vietnam's victory on the radio everyday. In secondary school, when I was mature enough to consciously learn things around me, I would see some of my friends wear beautiful clothes that they claimed to have been sent from America by their relatives. Back then, my thought about that was, "Well, their relatives must be really rich to have all of these sent for them." Also, in conversations with elder people who are my parents' close friends, I would hear them talk about their own time or their friends' in re-education camps, their yearning for the past and their dream to join with Vietnamese friends and relatives in America. Of course in those days, we only heard these in really intimate conversations in which I was lucky enough to be included. My parents themselves did not actively participate in the war; they did not take any side. However, my father's family background made him become more sympathetic with those who worked for the Southern Vietnam government. My grandfather had been in the French army and had converted to Catholicism, which later turned out to be a stigma for his family when the Communists took

² According to the July 1954 Geneva Agreements, Vietnam was divided into Northern Vietnam and Southern Vietnam. After the Agreement, the U.S. replaced the French as a political backup for Ngo Dinh Diem, then Prime Minister of the State of Vietnam and he asserted his power in the South. For more details, see George McTurnan Kahin and John W. Lewis, *The United States in Vietnam* (New York: Dial Press, 1967).

over the North. That chapter in his life made his children suffer a lot of discrimination from the Vietnamese governmental offices where they worked later in life. My father was denied many chances for promotion and could never make his dream of studying abroad come true. Such experiences made his heart turn to those who worked for the Southern government. I came to know about the Vietnamese refugees that way.

My interest in Vietnamese Americans grew deeper over time, especially during my college years. Stories about their plight to the U.S, their difficulties in adapting to the new culture and their concerns regarding preserving Vietnamese culture kept coming up in my talks with my friends whose relatives were Vietnamese Americans. Conversations with my professors of American Culture at Hue University of Pedagogy also gave me some more ideas about race and class in the U.S and the conditions under which many Vietnamese people live. Then, again I realized something else, something more abstract and hard-to-deal-with. It is the struggles they have to go through in order to survive in a strange culture with a heritage different from their Vietnamese heritage. I also realized that their struggle is carried out in a country where race is a crucial issue. I was determined to learn more about them and their conditions in the U.S.

Bearing that in mind, I tried hard to get a scholarship to go to America and was lucky enough to be granted with a Fulbright in 2007. The Department of American Studies at the University of Kansas was my destination. Working with Professor David Katzman in AMS#805 class, my understanding about race, class and ethnicity was fortified. It was also this class that gave me the inspiration to continue with my initial goal: to learn about Vietnamese Americans. However, it became clear that I needed to narrow my research interest and topic after consulting with many professors. Again, it was Professor Katzman who gave me the “food-for-thought” for

my project. He recommended Sucheng Chan's book, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation: Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings, Asian American History and Culture* (2006). I was completely enchanted with title, and enthralled with the accounts of life writings by the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese people whom Chan included in her book.³ The autobiographies portray a vivid picture of Vietnamese Americans' lives that I had been looking for and resonate with those stories that I have heard since childhood. They also denote that Vietnamese Americans are by no means a homogeneous group. They differ greatly, which is represented so convincingly by writers of the 1.5 generation through their background, their condition before and after leaving their homeland. Moreover, the fact that they were born in Vietnam, experienced the evacuation out of Saigon and engage actively in American society injects their autobiographies with an amazingly diverse layers of meanings. I sensed the uniqueness of this generation through their life accounts included in Chan's book. My subject of study for my project should be this generation then, I was so determined.

I started with a trip to Portland, Oregon where I spent two weeks at my friend's place. Although I know that Orange County in Los Angeles has the largest community of Vietnamese Americans, I chose to start with Portland because I have more acquaintances there. I could not help convincing myself that everything would be easier where I have connection. It was an exciting trip and helped me clarify many things, especially the relationship between my intended

³ Sucheng Chan collected these autobiographies from her students in four universities where she used to teach - UC Berkeley, Santa Cruz, San Diego, and Santa Barbara. These are the result of her assignments for them. In her book, Chan defines the "1.5 generation" as 'immigrants who come at a young age who retain their ability to speak, if not always to read and write, the ancestral language as well as Asian values and norms. Such individuals perform a unique bridging function, given their ability to understand their elders and their American-born peers. They often act as cultural brokers, regardless of whether they wish to do so between their grandparents, parents, aunts, and uncles, on the one hand, and the younger, usually American-born members of their families, on the other.'

study subject and myself as a novice researcher. That was the first time that I had ever felt the influence of my own identity on my research: I am Vietnamese born after the war who grew up in a Communist regime. With my friend's introduction to the Vietnamese community in Oregon, I had intimate and open conversations with people who would identify themselves as the first generation. For some reasons, I always find myself more comfortable talking to elder people and I also find that most of them would love to talk to me. However, when it came to the people of my interest – the 1.5 generation Vietnamese people – I started to feel some miscommunication and some uneasiness lurking in our talks. Was it because of my identity as someone from Vietnam? Was it because of my coming to the US with a scholarship?⁴ I was not able to explain, unfortunately. However, I also have to confess that much of what I felt had to do with my emotional fragility, something I would justify with my inexperience in my role as a novice researcher. I gave up hastily, convincing myself that was not going to work. I still do not really know whether it was a good or bad decision, but it did lead me to a different direction. Why shouldn't I work with autobiographies? Was I not so interested in those in Chan's book? After all, Chan did not provide an analysis of the autobiographies, and I am interested in how they represent themselves through their life writings. That was how I came up with life writings by authors of this generation. To me, despite the difficulties I had to deal with when working with literary texts; a concern I will mention later, I felt more inspired and compassionate with the characters who represented the subject of study in the texts.

I find myself relating to the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans for who I am and who I am not. I am a Vietnamese woman born after the America-Vietnam war. I am a Catholic from

⁴ For some reasons, it is a common belief in my country that if you have a scholarship, you are children of high-ranking officials.

the central area of Vietnam and grew up my entire life under the Vietnamese Communist Regime, a fact that I did not recognize until later in my life. I speak English and Vietnamese, and I learn about American culture both in Vietnam and in America thanks to my study here. The identity I claim for myself puts me and my study subject in a unique equation. We occupy some common space, yet differ in many ways, which I consider both an advantage and a disadvantage.

First of all, I see my subjects of study as Vietnamese despite the fact that they are Vietnamese American. We share certain Vietnamese cultural values such as family connection or kinship – one that is a crucial aspect in our culture and one that is constantly present in most of the life writings I analyze. I say “certain” because of the differences we might have; those that derive from the local regions where we are from or the time period in which we live. However, we were all brought up in a thousand-year tradition of Vietnamese culture and, somewhere in our hearts, I trust that our Vietnamese basic cultural tradition is deep-rooted. I find this overlapping part helpful to me in interpreting the texts. However, there is always a risk of taking things for granted in my part, which turns out to be a disadvantage for me.

Secondly, I am a Catholic, and that is useful when dealing with religious issues in the narratives. This is not to say that all the authors of the life writings I analyze are Christians. However, to have an understanding of a particular religion does influence my view of the role of religion in the process of adapting to life in a new country.

Thirdly and by coincidence, I approach the texts as a woman. Because all the authors are women, I see myself in the texts when the authors mention the constraints that most Vietnamese women share in the family ties or the duties we have to handle as a daughter and a granddaughter in the family.

Finally, to some extent, I can hear the authors' struggle to adapt to the new culture. I am from Vietnam and came to the U.S. for my study. Although a two-year period of time does not say much, I have been able to understand the difficulties and obstacles in my effort to settle down. Therefore, when reading about the efforts of these women to find their voices in the new country, I see myself in the same boat with them.

As much as I see my similarities with the authors, I also find many differences

I am a Vietnamese who was born after the war with no first-hand experience of it. This prevents me from understanding thoroughly the destructive impact that the war had on the people and their families. I am referring to the trauma and the haunting memories of the event that the authors went through. I guess I cannot really feel the pain they might have felt; I cannot experience the traumas they lived through.

I also differ from them in terms of political background. As a Vietnamese, I am not making a claim that I am a Communist, but the fact that I am from a Communist country does inform the way I approach my study subject. I consider my background as an obstacle because, as I have mentioned earlier, it prevents me from eliciting the information I need from my subject of study. In other words, where I am from has nothing to do with the way I interpret the texts because my intention is to avoid political issue, but it did matter when I initially tried to approach my study subject directly using ethnographical method.

All in all, after scaling all the pros and cons, I consider my dual position as an acquaintance and a stranger to my subject of study as both an advantage and a disadvantage. The similarities allow me to share certain aspects of their lives narrated in their writings, but put me at risk with

inserting subjective interpretation. The differences appear to be obstacles at first, but they help me keep a distance with the authors, allowing or permitting more objective observation.

The 1.5 generation constitutes the population of Vietnamese people who left Vietnam in the year 1975, which marks the end of the America-Vietnam war on the one hand. On the other hand, it is the beginning of the mass immigration of Vietnamese to the United States. The rumors that there would soon be a blood-bath once the Communist takes over the country caused horrible chaos among people in the South of Vietnam, even those who had no connection with the U.S government.⁵ They were compelled to leave their country abruptly due to circumstances which they perceived as life-threatening.⁶ The only thought they had in mind was to get out of the country as soon as possible and to do that by any means. Interestingly, most of them who left did not think that they would leave their homeland forever. It was for them just a contemporary escape; they fled with the hope of returning when the country “goes back to normal.” Hence, they were not immigrants who were prepared to integrate into the new country – America as the host nation. They were refugees who were seeking shelter.

According to William T. Liu, most refugees did go through four stages:

- (1) Leaving Vietnam;
- (2) Being in the transit, transition to nowhere;
- (3) Being at the camps;

⁵ Gail Paradise Kelly, *From Vietnam to America: A Chronicle of the Vietnamese Immigration to the United States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1977).

⁶ Darrel Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979).

(4) And finally being sponsored and resettled.⁷

Most Vietnamese people left Vietnam in chaos after the fall of Saigon, leaving behind most of their belongings, even their relatives. If they were lucky, and if they had some connection with the U.S. they could leave the country on planes; if not, they had to find their own ways, and most of them ended up risking their lives by boarding overcrowded ships or boats. People did not go straight to America. Most of them were transferred from one refugee camp to another in the Philippines, Singapore, Guam Island, etc. Many of them lost their lives in the vast oceans. After arriving in the U.S, they were sent straight to the camps. There were four camps opened. The first was Camp Pendleton, California, opened in April 29, 1975. Fort Chaffee, Arkansas quickly followed, opening May 2. Then came Eglin Air Force Base, Florida, May 4 and Fort Indiantown Gap, Pennsylvania, May 28.⁸ Set up as relocation centers, they became contemporary houses to refugees who were waiting for job offers and resettlement. The resettlement camps were American-created institutions geared to serve American-defined needs. Their sole function was to resettle Vietnamese in the United States according to policies made in Washington. Here, the refugees were taken care of by organizations such as the Red Cross and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). Both provided social services such as child-care classes, college placement services, and recreational programs. The Interagency Task Force (IATF) and the U.S. military provided cultural programs, implementing government policy, and the processing and resettlement of the refugees.⁹ At the same time, once the refugees had been interviewed, given a medical examination, and assigned to living quarters within the camps, they were assigned to one

⁷ William Thomas Liu, *Transition to Nowhere: Vietnamese Refugees in America* (Nashville: Charter House, 1979).

⁸ Montero, *Vietnamese Americans*, 89.

⁹ U.S. Department of States, 1975b, cited in Montero, *Vietnamese Americans*, 1979

of the nine voluntary resettlement agencies (VOLAGs) which assumed the task of finding sponsors and resettling them in the mainstream of American society.¹⁰ The assumption was that refugees were prepared to integrate into American lifestyle prior to achieving sponsorship and resettlement, which, in the minds of Americans in charge, would help them avoid further problems associated with the uninvited, such as unemployment, homelessness, etc. In other words, Vietnamese refugees were “reshaped” to be Americans and they had no other choice but to accept that, despite the difficulties. As Liu points out, “in some cases, the refugee does not in any sense have a choice, because he is physically swept up in a panic exodus or caught outside his home country by the turn of events. Entry into refugee status thus, to some degree, is involuntary, and the refugee often is ill-prepared psychologically and practically for his sudden departure from his familiar social world.”¹¹

It’s worth noting here the reaction of many Americans to the arrival of Vietnamese refugees in the U.S. “Damn it, we have too many Orientals already. If they all gravitate to California, the tax and welfare rolls will get overburdened and we already have our share of the illegal aliens.”¹² This is understandable for from the point of view of the public in the host country, the evacuation episode seemed to be overwhelmed by the considerations of resettling the refugees within the United States. Apparently, Americans were not ready to welcome Vietnamese refugees, especially in California. As Liu mentions:

Governor Brown declared, “We can’t be looking five thousand miles away at the same time neglecting people who are living here” (*U.S. News and World Report*,

¹⁰ Montero, *Vietnamese Americans*, 89.

¹¹ Liu, *Transition to Nowhere*, 179.

¹² Former Representative Burt Talcott (R. Calif.), cited by Liu, *Transition to Nowhere*, 72, 1979.

May 15, 1975, p.22). An Arkansas woman said: “They say it’s a lot colder here than in Vietnam, with a little luck, maybe all those Vietnamese will take pneumonia and die” (*Newsweek*, May 12, 1975, p.32). Senator McGovern also expressed his view: “Ninety percent of Vietnamese refugees would be better off going back to their own land.”¹³

This shows the difficult situation that Vietnamese refugees had to face. The negative reaction of many Americans informs the discrimination they had to face. Meanwhile, their condition in the camps was no better than what they were experiencing because there was a conflict among the organizations in charge. The IATF were administrators whose goals were to get the refugees settled as quickly as possible. This created conflicts with VOLAG personnel who were more inclined to screen prospective sponsors very carefully and move more slowly in an effort to make resettlement for the Vietnamese as painless as possible. There were only four ways for the refugees to leave the camps: (1) obtain permission for third-country resettlement through the embassy of that country; (2) seek repatriation to Vietnam; (3) offer proof of enough financial reserves to be self-supporting; or (4) find an American individual or group willing to act as a sponsor.¹⁴

None of these options gave the Vietnamese refugees any agency, except for the third one, which I believe would have been most difficult. The rest require a third party’s acceptance. In most of the cases, the Vietnamese made the fourth choice , which resulted in their being scattered in regions across the U.S. According to Kelly, much of the resettlement pattern among states

¹³ *Time*, May 19, 1975, p.9

¹⁴ Kelly, *From Vietnam to America*, 77.

reflects Americans resettling Vietnamese. The resettlement of Vietnamese in states like Wisconsin, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Indiana, and Wyoming are examples of the contacts of American voluntary agencies. Where the VOLAGs had ties, Vietnamese were settled. Similarly, Vietnamese were resettled where corporations needed un-skilled labor or skills that the Vietnamese possessed. States in which they were relocated also include Florida, Texas and Louisiana where they became nonunion farm labor and were employed in the fishing industry; in other areas they plucked and processed chickens, made candy or clothes, or provided custodial care in nursing homes, hospitals, etc. Kelly also states that Vietnamese were dispersed, but this dispersal was uneven. The resettlement did lay a basis for Vietnamese communities spread throughout many cities in the United States; it did not provide a ground work for one united Vietnamese community that could exert a power on its own. This is completely different from the case of earlier Chinese or Japanese people who could concentrate together and establish their own community. After all, Vietnamese participation in making decisions about their initial resettlement and the sponsorship program was minimal. Vietnamese did not resettle in America; they were resettled. They were forced to get out of the camps and went into the arms of sponsors American believed suitable and reliable.

As a diverse group of refugees in the U.S., Vietnamese American experienced different conditions and unique situations. According to E.F. Kunz, refugee movements can be divided into two classifications, anticipatory and acute.¹⁵ Anticipatory refugees are those who leave home in an orderly way after some preparation. The prospects are good, Kunz observes, for these refugees to adjust satisfactorily to life in a new land. Acute refugees, on the other hand, are those

¹⁵ E.F. Kunz, "*The Refugees in Flight: Kinetic Models and Forms of Displacement.*" *International Migration Review* 7 (1973): 125-46.

who flee in the wake of massive political and military upheaval. Kunz suggests that the acute refugees might face more difficult problems of adjustment than the anticipatory group. So who are Vietnamese refugees? Are they acute or anticipatory refugees? This is crucial for understanding their experience. Apparently, on the one hand, most left the country without preparation or any plans, which would assign them to the category of “acute.” Among them, some can be peasants or fishermen who had never been exposed to American culture. On the other hand, many of them were familiar with Western culture and had some language skills such as English and French; this would qualify them as “anticipatory.” The latter were either employees in American government and companies in Vietnam such as high-ranking officials of the South Vietnamese government, military leaders, provincial and district chiefs, mayors, secretaries, translators, intelligence experts, propagandists; or they were relatives of those people. Often one member of a refugee family has known or worked with Americans in Vietnam.¹⁶ Previous familiarity with Western culture, including language, employment, customs, and traditions, while limited, gives Vietnamese a distinct kind of anticipatory socialization to the Western world. Thus, when the Vietnamese leave their homeland, they have an advantage over earlier Chinese and Japanese immigrants, who did not have the same familiarity with Western culture. The joint influence of these socioeconomic factors and the personal relationship with Americans facilitates the Vietnamese adaptation to America. Therefore, as Montero argues, while Kunz’s classifications are helpful, they are somewhat inadequate when applied to the Vietnamese experience. Aspects of both the acute and anticipatory refugee patterns appear to merge, forming a unique refugee group.

¹⁶ Kelly, *From Vietnam to America*, 55.

Most 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans now were young children and teenagers in Vietnam. Along with their parents or grandparents, they either passively or actively took part in the whole process of leaving Vietnam, arriving in the U.S and trying to settle down. However, their existence in the procedure was largely ignored by scholars despite the more complicated process of adaptation they experienced after that. Recent years have seen the publication of a few excellent interdisciplinary studies of Vietnamese children and the Vietnamese family (see, for example, Kaplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1991; Kibria 1993; Muzny 1989; Rutledge 1985, 1992; Liu 1979; Starr and Roberts 1985). Most of these works, however, have been concerned with specific issues associated with resettlement and attendant changes in Vietnamese family life, providing important baseline information but not fully exploring the complex process of adaptation among the newer generations (the 1.5 and 2.0 generations).¹⁷

Fortunately, Sucheng Chan's groundbreaking book (2006) *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation – Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings* is the first book dedicated entirely to this special generation, as indicated by its title. The book's intention is to focus on Vietnamese Americans; however, what it poignantly and explicitly reflects upon is Asian American Studies as a field of study. The book in fact directly addresses issues within this field such as the tensions between capitalism and Communism and between pedagogy and politics while highlighting the complexities of Vietnamese American experiences that have remained largely ignored or avoided. Chan ultimately addresses the field's tensions/complexities by presenting edited versions of student family histories, autobiographies, and interviews written by Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation. Thus, in this book, Chan uses life narratives to

¹⁷ Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston, III, *Growing up American: How Vietnamese Children Adapt to Life in the United States* (New York : Russell Sage Foundation, 1998), 4.

illustrate her argument about issues in the field of Asian American Studies and ignores the significance of the voice heard in the texts that, in my opinion, definitely play a key role in helping this generation to represent their identity.

Likewise, also to partly fill in the gap, Zhou and Bankston' *Growing Up American* (1998) gives a deeper insight into the assimilation process of the Vietnamese Americans. A concern with the community, its organization, and its impact on socioeconomic adaptation lies in the heart of their work, adding an entirely new dimension to an understanding of the process by which the Vietnamese have sought to get ahead. While the book provides a vivid illustration of the adaptation process of these newer Vietnamese American generations, it focuses much more on the second generation than on the 1.5 generation although that group is mentioned.

In most of the cases, the 1.5 generation grows up in the cross-cultural environment, with both the dominant American and the Vietnamese cultures around them. Their memories of the motherland are not as clear and fortified as those of their parents to help them remain as Vietnamese as the first generation would expect. However, it is these memories that create more difficulties for them in integrating into the dominant American culture. Inevitably, they have to struggle within a liminal space where the cultural clash happens most severely. Therefore, it is through the study of this generation that we can learn the most. To me, they should play a central role in studies that attempt to discover/describe Vietnamese's process of adapting to U.S culture and establishing their standing in the new land. Their experiences in both Vietnam and America are at play in the whole process, which will definitely provide a vivid picture of the transformation from being Vietnamese to Vietnamese Americans of Vietnamese refugees. I believe that it can not be found in the first or the second generation whose identity tends to conform with the dominant culture, either Vietnamese or American. Thus, in this discussion, I

want to explore the way this special generation represents its identity by examining these questions: What happened to them after arriving in the United States? What has become of them? Which identity do they claim themselves? How do they do that? Are there any differences between the way they represent their identity and those of other Asian Americans? I will try to answer these questions by studying some life narratives written by authors of this generation.

Vietnamese American writers of 1.5 generation adopt the form of life narrative as a site in which they can both narrate the incidents of their life and represent their identity at the same time. These life narratives, an overarching term for “writing of diverse kinds that takes a life as its subject,” “include many kinds of self-referential writing, including autobiography” (Smith and Watson, 2001, 5). The plot they employ usually involves a young boy or a young girl along with his/her family (sometimes just the mother or the father, or even grandparents) leaving Vietnam after the war. They would be bound for America, and once settled in, would have to deal with issues that typify the immigrant experience. Examples of this literary genre by Vietnamese American writers are Lan Cao’s “Monkey Bridge”, Quang X. Pham’s acclaimed father-son memoir “A Sense of Duty”, Andrew Lam’s PEN Award-winning “Perfume Dreams”, or Aimee Phan’s debut collection of short stories “We Should Never Meet”. Recent years (2001- present) have also seen a considerable number of life narratives that tackle similar issues in the adapting process and the effort to represent identity of this generation. Examples include *The Unwanted* by Nguyen Kien (2001), *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* by le thi diem thuy (2003), *Song of Saigon* by Anh Vu Sawyer (2003), *Sai Gon to San Diego: Memoir of a Boy Who Escaped from Communist Vietnam* by Trinh Quang Do, or *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner* (2007) by Bich Minh Nguyen.

However, similar to the situation of the group of as a whole, this body of texts has received only limited scholarly attention in Asian American Studies or Asian American Literary Criticism. The emphasis has been largely on earlier groups of Asian immigrants with a particular focus on Chinese speaking immigrants and Chinese-speaking authors, slightly on Korean and Japanese Americans and the so-called Asian-American Renaissance.¹⁸ Although Asian American texts have been considered to be *minority*, or even *minor* as Sheng-mei Ma observes, at least Chinese Americans' voice and others such as Korean American, Japanese Americans have been heard in the scholarly conversation.¹⁹ Unfortunately, this is not the case of Vietnamese immigrants. My project thus will partly fill in the gap by exploring the body of texts I have mentioned – the life narratives of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans.

In this study, I will examine the ways Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation represent their identity through their life writings in three texts: *Song of Saigon* (2003) by Anh Vu Sawyer, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) by le thi diem thuy, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007) by Bich Minh Nguyen. These three texts stand out to me as typical illustrations of Vietnamese war refugees' experience. They also represent different categories of refugees that Kunz classified – anticipatory and acute refugees. I am aware of the availability of scholarship that deals with identity representation in Asian American literature and I can see that many of the approaches are deployed in the body of texts I examine. These include, for example, the decentering style suggested by Rocio G. Davis and Zhou (in *Song of Saigon* by Anh Vu Sawyer), the strategic enactment theorized by Tina Chen (in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* by Bich Minh

¹⁸ See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1993), Tina Chen, *Double Agency: Acts of Impersonation in Asian American Literature and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), Sheng-mei Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora*, 1998.

Nguyen), or the integration and reconciliation with one's home culture developed by Jennifer Ann Ho.²⁰ However, given the differences I have discussed above between Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation and Chinese, Japanese, or Korean immigrants, I will only use these approaches as a source for reference. I personally find Kunz's classification of the anticipatory and acute refugees more useful in my analysis. Therefore, in examining the texts I chose for my study, I will mainly focus on the themes utilized by the authors in conjunction with the deployment of timelines in the light of Kunz's study. There are three main themes that these authors seem to use: (1) religion (conversion), (2) imagined spaces and (3) negotiation through food ways, language and other aspects between the two cultures (American and Vietnamese). These are very different terrains and might give the impression that they do not relate to each other when it comes to the representation of a generation. However, it is worth remembering that the 1.5 generation, just like Vietnamese American as a whole group, are not homogeneous. Interestingly, the texts I choose for my study reflect the diversity of refugee patterns classified by Kunz, which helps depict their authors' various and unique identities as a group. While most of the texts cover the stages that a typical refugee goes through, each text deals with a particular situation and particular facets in each author's effort to represent their identity through the predominant theme it employs. One strikingly similar characteristic, however, is highlighted in all three narratives, which is the intensity of loss that these authors suffer as a member of the 1.5 generation. Thus, the different themes are related in the sense that they help fill the voids that these authors, despite their different backgrounds and conditions, all describe. Together, they create a mosaic of identity of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans reflecting its diversity as a group.

²⁰ For more details on these approaches, see Chen (2005), Ho (2005), and Zhou (2005).

In chapter I, I examine Anh Vu Sawyer's *Song of Saigon* (2003) and argue that this narrative takes the form and theme of a conversion narrative.²¹ First, by analyzing the strategies that the author uses to construct the conversion narrative, I claim that the religious conversion of the first generation in Vietnam – represented in the story of the author's grandfather – is the premise for the cultural conversion/adaptation of the 1.5 generation – as presented through the story of the author. I also assert that the conversion process (religion and culture) takes place in Vietnam, which symbolically reflects the anticipatory condition of the author as refugee when she came to the U.S. Second, by looking at the issue of time in the narrative, I posit that the linear timeline is deployed deliberately, which again reflects her condition as an anticipatory refugee.

In chapter II, I look into le thi diem thuy *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (2003) both in terms of form and content to describe a different approach of representing identity. In the analysis, I argue that by taking the form of an autofiction, the author allows herself to tell the history of her life and her family without hurting her parents.²² Accordingly, the text is deployed as an imagined site in which she can depict her identity at the same time. Furthermore, by examining the images and the silence embedded in the text, I conclude that the author uses those to create for herself an imagined comfort zone in which she can survive the trauma of the war and her escape, the struggles and challenges in looking for her own voice in a new world. In terms of timeline, this memoir deploys a disruptive one, which, in conjunction with the imagined spaces, highlights the condition of the author as an acute refugee.

²¹ Diane Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self: Two Hundred Years of American Autobiography* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²² Ibid

In chapter III, I analyze Bich Minh Nguyen's *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (2007), focusing on the main theme of the memoir – food as a means to be recognized as American. While extending other critics' ideas about this aspect of assimilation, I also look into the reasons behind the author's effort to consume American fast food in order to forge an American identity. The analysis makes it clear that the author does that not only to be recognized as an insider but also to fill up the void created by the process of growing up as a Vietnamese American. These are the lack of a mother, of a stable family and of an out-going personality. I argue that her effort to create an American identity through food and foodway and her constant struggle reflect her state of an acute refugee coming to America without being prepared. I also explore the way temporality is used in the narrative to strengthen my claim of her condition as an acute refugee.

The analysis shows that most of the time, these authors end up occupying the in-between space, resonating with the term 1.5 generation. They are like a bridge that stands between and links the two cultures – Vietnamese and American- together. They belong to a generation that has to suffer too much from trauma and loss, of which, they are made constantly aware. Thus they represent the typical struggle that most immigrants go through in finding their own voice in the new land. We can hardly understand the experience of Vietnamese Americans as a group without having an idea of how this 1.5 generation navigate the whole process of adapting to a new culture. Also, the different strategies used by authors of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans reflect the diversity in terms of their family backgrounds and circumstances prior to arrival in the U.S. Together, they represent the group as a special whole – the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans.

Despite my effort to explore this generation in my project, there are certain aspects this paper does not address. For example, I do not account here for those differences in the strategies

that male and female authors might deploy in representing their identity. Besides, the paper does not make a comparison and contrast between the 1.5 generation and the first or the second generation. In my opinion, such a comparison and contrast will yield interesting readings in identity representation among generations depending on different experiences of trauma and war.

In terms of methodology, I see some drawbacks when using content analysis to interpret literary texts. While this approach allows me to actively engage in the conversation with the authors and helps me avoid the anxiety of encountering political issues; my interpretations are subjective. Interviews with the authors of the life narratives I used in my project and other 1.5ers of Vietnamese American would provide more objective readings to the perspectives presented in the paper.

As far as the scope of my project is concerned, three texts used as case study do not allow me to have a generalization in the identity representation of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese Americans considering the variables and the diversity they embody as a group. All I can do with this project is to approach and reveal a tiny piece of the enormous reality about this generation.

CHAPTER I: THE CONVERSIONS IN *SONG OF SAIGON*

"I didn't know exactly how I would fit into God's plan. But by the time I turned twenty in March 1975, I was emboldened by an overriding sense of assurance that the war would not destroy my family.²³ Week by week, the North Vietnamese army was drawing closer to Vietnam, and yet, even as rumors of a takeover mounted, I never doubted that God would act on our behalf.

...

"During those unsettling days, I would sometimes think back to Hue and those terrible scenes on TV seven years earlier at Tet. But I pushed aside the voices of fear that echoed in my mind.

...

"I dare to hope for the impossible, because I knew that when I committed myself to God wholeheartedly in prayer, he would act. And he did act, in ways I can only marvel at now..."²⁴

Song of Saigon – Anh Vu Sawyer's life narrative coauthored by Pam Proctor – makes an explicit and thorough embracement of religion. From the very first pages, Vu's memoir is "based on her strong faith—a faith first introduced to her family by her grandfather, an opium addict who converted to Christianity and became a respected church elder."^{25, 26} In an interview with Lynn Bolt Rosendale, Vu said, "I thought I was holding on to God for hope through all of those years, but I found out that it was God who never let go of me. I have learned that God calls us to be his hands and heart to love and serve his people wherever he puts us. Our witness comes from

²³This marks the beginning of the Fall of Saigon during the America – Vietnam War when American troops started to withdraw out of the country.

²⁴Anh Vu Sawyer and Pam Proctor, *Song of Saigon* (New York: Warner Faith, 2003).

²⁵ I will use her maiden name, Vu, in my analysis because of the relevance to most of the events in her memoir.

²⁶ Lynn Bolt Rosendale, "Anh Vu Sawyer: Saigon Evacuee Tells her Story", <http://www.calvin.edu/publications/mosaic/spring03/sawyer.htm>

others seeing our lives.”²⁷ Especially, the dominant theme of religion is deployed throughout the narrative as both a strategy to portray her condition as an anticipatory refugee, and as a means for her to achieve her desired identity of a Vietnamese American of the 1.5 generation. I will discuss these two issues later in this chapter.

In twenty five chapters that read like thrilling fiction, Vu gives a vivid account of her life in conjunction with her family’s history. The book is a haunting memoir that describes growing up in the shadow of the Vietnam War, the desperate struggle of one family to survive amid the chaos of the fall of Saigon and its aftermath, their escape to freedom, and the return to Vietnam on a personal humanitarian mission.

Vu starts the narrative with their narrow escape out of Saigon in 1975 after the war ended claiming that the miracle happened with the grace of God and that God did give her a vision. She writes, “[d]espite our desperate situation, I felt a strange calm. I wasn’t the least bit nervous because the image of the flying machine kept coming back to me. In fact, I couldn’t get it out of my mind. With each passing minute, I felt more and more certain that God was about to act.”^{28, 29} Her belief in God is also utilized as a mechanism for her to lead the readers back to the past where the origin of such faith can be traced.

“It all began in a haze of opium,” writes Vu introducing her grandfather, Tieu. He was desperately dependent on opium due to his disillusionment due to the war, and hence, ruined his family and his own life. However, a miracle happened when he met Richmond Merrill Jackson, a

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ This is the term the author uses to refer to the image of a plane that she thought she saw in her vision of God’s plan for her family.

²⁹ Sawyer and Proctor, *Song of Saigon*, 6.

missionary from America, and converted into Christianity. His conversion is regarded as a blessing for the whole family. It is believed to bring about success in his career, and above all, the healing for his daughter and the writer's mother Nghia, who was born with a fatal disease. As a result, Tieu's wife also converted and accompanied her husband in developing and protecting their faith.

The narrative continues with Nghia's marriage to Phuong, a Communist who was willing to convert to Christianity, after her separation from her first love for the sake of her faith (her first boyfriend was a Buddhist), as well as her struggle in life when her husband left her to join his comrades in the jungle. After being betrayed by his peers, he begged her forgiveness and joined her to head for the South in one of Vietnam's biggest exoduses for freedom of practicing their religion. Their suffering due to the war between Vietnam and America in the South reached a breaking point where escape was the only option.

The rest of the book deals with their experience, first in the refugees' camp and later in America, especially the writer's process of growing up in the new land in "God's mercy." Vu sees God's intervention in the constraints of her emotional life, in her turbulent relationship with Philip, her American husband, as well as in her troublesome relationship with her parents, who object to her identifying as a Vietnamese American.

Interwoven in the account are Vietnam historical contexts in the periods Vu focuses on. These show a Vietnamese history with several predominant themes: (1) the resistance to outside domination (in this memoir it is the domination of the French and the Americans); (2) the march to the South (her parents had to leave the North for the South to seek their freedom); (3) and the

conflict between the divided North and South.^{30, 31} In my opinion, the historical contexts that Vu includes in her memoir have different implications. The contexts may help build background knowledge for readers who are not familiar with Vietnamese history as well as enlist their sympathy with the author.

The synopsis above depicts a general picture of the author's condition prior to and after her arrival to the U.S. as a refugee. The account has many elements representing Kunz's classification of anticipatory refugees that I have mentioned in the introduction. First of all, let us consider: Vu's grandfather worked for the French people, was spiritually saved by an American, converted to Christianity and passed his faith down to his children and grandchildren. This resonates with Kunz's idea of the anticipatory category. Indeed, Darrel Montero observes, "previous familiarity with Western culture, including language, employment, customs and traditions, while limited, gives the Vietnamese a distinct kind of anticipatory socialization to the Western world."³² In terms of temporality, I argue that the timeline deployed in this narrative reflects orderliness as a characteristic of the anticipatory condition. Despite the fact that there are two narrative moments in this account, which I will elaborate in the analysis later, a chronological order is deployed.³³ Generally, it begins with the grandfather's life of the author,

³⁰ The Franco-Vietnamese War (The First Indochina War) took place in 1956, and ended in 1954 with the Geneva accords. The Vietnam War began in 1950 with the arrival of American military advisor and ended in 1975 with the withdrawal of American troops out of Saigon.

³¹ Paul Rutledge, *The Role of Religion in Ethnic Self-Identity: A Vietnamese Community* (Lanham - New York - London: University Press of America, 1985). Rutledge also includes a sense of place and the value of education in the list of dominant themes of Vietnamese history.

³² Darrel Montero, *Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States* (Boulder: Westview Press, Inc., 1979), 60.

³³ According to Sindonie Smith and Julia Watson in "Reading Autobiography _ a Guide for Interpreting Life Narrative" (2001), narrative moment is used to identify the time of the telling.

then her parents' life, then her departure for the U.S. and finally her life in America as well as her return to Vietnam. The author here plays with historical time in a linear order; which simultaneously reflects her mental condition. It seems to me that she felt what happened is a matter of time and a matter of course.

The pattern of the timeline and the theme of religion in *Song of Saigon* also allowed me to read this narrative as a conversion narrative which consists of three stages: pre-conversion, conversion and post-conversion. Besides, the inclusion of an ancestor – the grandfather – in the depiction of the author's self, denotes a strategy that needs investigation.

As a conversion narrative, this memoir invites an answer to the following questions: What is the significance of religion to Vietnamese immigrants? Are there any connections between religion and the adaptation process? Is conversion itself adaptation? I will elaborate on the significance of Christianity to the experience of the writer's family and herself to add another perspective into the mainstream conceptualization of reading Vietnamese Americans' conversion as a way to adapt to the new culture.

The pattern of a conversion narrative is embedded in the two different stories and narrative moments told in *Song of Saigon*. Also, I claim that the conversions of the author's grandfather and of Vu herself happened due to the wars in Vietnam. Indeed, along with the war came the soldiers, the missionaries, and of course, the culture of the intruders.³⁴

With the first narrative moment, Anh Vu Sawyer talks about the conversion of her grandfather. According to Bjorklund, conversion narratives always consist of three parts that deal

³⁴ For more details on Vietnamese history of wars, see Chan, 2006.

with three different stages of the process: pre-conversion, conversion and post-conversion. All of these can be traced in the major part of *Song of Saigon* about her grandfather and later in the writer's life in America.

As Bjorklund suggests, the preconversion stage deals with a sinful self.

The first stage was the preconversion period of wickedness... This depiction of sinful (childhoods) before conversion illustrated the common “fallen” natures of the autobiographers and provided a dramatic contrast case to highlight their strengthened postconversion ability to resist temptation. By recalling a reasonable number of sins from this period, they showed that they had scrutinized their own lives and thoughts diligently and, furthermore, that they were humble enough to confess such sinfulness publicly.³⁵

Readers can easily find this sinfulness and wretchedness in the self of Tieu – the grandfather. A man of twenty-eight years old, he has no hope and nothing to cling to but the house of opium. He lives without knowing how to navigate his life through the chaotic and critical historic moments of his country. He leaves his wife and his children behind just to find his home in the smoke of the lethal substance. I read this as sin, as human weakness, as depravity. In other words, it is damnation on earth. All of those are indicators of a sinful, pre-converted self that Bjorklund discusses in the quote above. In other words, they match with the conversion pattern.

It is worth noticing that Vu portrays her grandfather's fallen nature in conjunction with the events happening in the history of Vietnam. The context is during the war in which

³⁵ Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self*, 54.

Vietnamese people were fighting against the French army in the late 20th century. It was common that men of his generation became addicted to drugs as a way to avoid their reality, especially when they found themselves useless and lost in defending the country. Consequently, in their own country, most of them were mentally imprisoned in two critical ways, first by the exploitation of the colonization of the French and then by the domination of opium. They created their own world in which opium was their only savior and in which they yearned for only one goal: freedom. I would argue that it must have been these circumstances that drove them to addiction. In fact, French people used to consider opium as a means to exploit the colonized people. Sucheng Chan says,

Unable to raise much revenue from Cochinchina, the French colonial administrators resorted to levying heavy taxes, especially on the sale of salt, alcohol, and opium, which they made into state monopolies. To maximize their income from these three monopolies, they imposed quotas to force each Vietnamese community, both rural and urban, to consume annually specified amounts of alcohol and opium, an addictive drug.³⁶

However, there was a moment that changes his life, the moment that brought him to another stage called “conversion” which Bjorklund describes as:

The miraculous metamorphosis from the old vile self to a new self. ... God’s grace, that is, God’s effort in one’s behalf, was a critical element in such a conversion.

What was being accomplished was a transformation of a sinner, subject to the

³⁶ Sucheng Chan, *The Vietnamese American 1.5 Generation – Stories of War, Revolution, Flight, and New Beginnings* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006), 15.

passions, to a person forgiven by God, humbly aware of his or her past depravity and able to battle the passions with greater effectiveness. A person was “reborn.”³⁷

Indeed, Tieu did go through a “miraculous metamorphosis” when he met an American missionary, Richmond Merrill Jackson, who according to Vu:

may have been short in stature, but he possessed a huge sense of God’s presence. For one thing, at an early age he developed the unswerving conviction that he would end up in Indochina as a missionary. His grandmother had prayed passionately for Southeast Asia from the time she was a teenager. She (his grandmother) had offered her life to God and had begged her Congregational church to send her to the mission field.³⁸

The encounter happened when Tieu was heading for the opium house and saw the man who tried to press a pamphlet into his hand. He did not pay much attention to it until he found out that there was no one in the opium house to give him the magical substance. In the trance of missing the essence of his life and having nothing else to do, he thought of the little pamphlet. Vu narrates:

The little pamphlet. What could be so important in the handout that had caused the foreigner to press it upon him? *And the man’s eyes.* Never had he seen such intense blue eyes. His heart had seemed to smolder within him at the very sight of them.

³⁷ Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self*, 54-5.

³⁸ Sawyer and Proctor, *Song of Saigon*, 24.

Tieu slipped his hand in his pocket, pulled out the tract and held it up to catch the flickering light of the kerosene lamp hanging several pallets away. At first, he could barely make out the words.

Tin Jesus . . .

“Believe in Jesus . . .”

Ban se duoc tu do.

“And you will be free.”

Tu do. The final words seemed to explode off the page. *Free!* He wanted true freedom more than opium – more than his very life. Was the foreigner still there?

Please be there.

...

For an instant Tieu paused, pondering what to do next. But then the urgency that propelled him out of the den took hold of him, and throwing aside all propriety, he ran up to the foreigner and cried, “Who is this Jesus? I want to be free!”³⁹

There are two crucial points worth noting here. First, Tieu’s conversion does not happen within his self, but rather through the assistance of the missionary who slipped the pamphlet into his hand. As a matter of fact, Tieu did not know Jesus. *Jesus* to him must have sounded just like any foreign name that he had ever heard. However, what drew him towards the missionary to learn about Jesus is the word *free* he saw as he glanced upon the pamphlet. Therefore, any differences

³⁹ Ibid., 29-30.

here in the conversion, if there are, lie in the fact that the converted did not know anything about the religion. The whole process happens with the help of Richmond, the missionary, who gradually pulls Tieu out of his drug obsession using prayers, good deeds and a promise of freedom. Secondly, it is interesting to observe how the author portrays Richmond, the American missionary, in this memoir as a savior through whom God carries out his plan. He is described as someone who “possessed a huge sense of God’s presence” and to whom people are drawn. Vu also mentions many other American missionaries, such as Giao si Cadman and Jake Van Hine, after whom her grandfather always tries to follow. “*If only I could be more like Giao si Cadman*⁴⁰, Tieu thought.”⁴¹ I read this as a ground that Vu carefully lays out in her memoir to explain another conversion, her own, not into *Christianity* but into *Americanness*.

After the conversion, Tieu, the grandfather, is in the third stage - the post conversion- during which Bjorklund argues the “struggle to conquer temptation was not over. There remained the continuous possibility of ‘backsliding’ or discovering one had been deluded about the conversion. ... In describing their lives after conversion, the autobiographers told of trials of their faith and how they were now able to resist many temptations.”⁴² Indeed, after the conversion, many times Tieu wanted to go back to opium. Many times, he is tempted with money and luxurious gifts that people want to give him for having high status in his office. Sometimes, he digresses and he “beg[s] God’s forgiveness. He knows that he has fallen short and that he will fail again and again. His only hope is to humble himself before his Savior and trust as he had many times before that in his own weaknesses, God’s power will be revealed.” The

⁴⁰ Emphasis in the original.

⁴¹ Sawyer and Proctor, *Song of Saigon*, 53.

⁴² Ibid., 56.

struggle and the resistance prevail. He works hard for the congregation and helps people out with his own money. In the family, “Tieu trie[s] his best to live abstemiously” and on the job, Tieu tries to “work as to the Lord.”⁴³

Tieu’s conversion and the defense of his faith throughout his life up to the moment of his death, his daughter’s (who is the writer’s mother) struggle in the war, as well as their disillusionment with Communism, provides the basis of the foundation for their descendants’ conversions. In other words, those are the seeds that bear the fruit of the writer’s assimilation into American culture, which actually began in Vietnam because of the historical circumstances. The popularization of American culture in Vietnam assists these conversions. From now on in my discussion of this chapter, *conversion* is used as *adaptation*.⁴⁴

Being born and brought up in a war-torn Vietnam with nothing but fear of death and instability, Vu gradually converts herself into an American in her own imagination. She starts out as an outsider who is exposed to American culture indirectly; this might be seen as the pre-conversion stage. She recounts, “Mostly, though, I saw images of America, a land of golden streets, abundant food, and infectious laughter. In this country where I imagined myself one day, the people were never touched by sadness. Instead, love filled their lives, along with warmth and friendship, as though God himself had prepared a special place for them – and for me.”⁴⁵ It is strikingly amazing for a child to think of a connection between God and what he might bring

⁴³ Ibid., 57.

⁴⁴ I consider the adaptation of immigrants into a new culture as a conversion from one culture to another, just as the conversion from one religion to another. People can adapt in many different ways, among which is to convert into a dominant religion in that culture.

⁴⁵ Sawyer and Proctor, *Song of Saigon*, 168.

about. However, she does not do it just on her own. The circumstance under which she is suffering, the upbringing she got, and the encounters she has made - they all play an important part in shaping her view. “My image of America came not from the raucous young soldiers I saw on the streets of Saigon, but from Mr. Titus and the other Mennonite missionaries I met at Vacation Bible School, which I attended summer after summer as a child. I can’t remember the lessons we learned or the crafts we made or the songs we sang.” However, she did remember the “love, a love that poured out of these simple, gentle people with such power that as soon as I walked through the gate to their compound, I felt enveloped in joy and peace.”⁴⁶ Was it the people that she encountered or the culture which the people brought along with them? The identification of America with God and with missionaries indicates this is a conversion narrative. The conversion into Christianity parallels the conversion into an American identity because what she is exposed to is not simply the religion itself. In other words, American culture is transmitted through the people, the artifacts and the ideas she encounters. Vu recalls:

The missionaries may have set the tone for my dreams of America, but it was the Christmas cards they gave us as prizes for memorizing Bible verses that fixed the vision in my mind. ... Of all the cards, the one I liked most was a color photograph of a house on a winter night, all covered with sparkling snow. Although the scene seemed very cold, the house beyond the driveway was lit with warmth and cheer. Through the yellow glow of the window, a Christmas tree twinkled with lights and ornaments, beckoning me inside.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

To me, the utter vastness of the cold outside of the house only accentuated the coziness inside, which seemed to glow with a divinely ordered life that was safe, comfortable, and filled with boundless joy. Like a child yearning for a toy in a toy store, I let my mind run wild with visions of what happiness the house might contain: what foods were being cooked, what games were being played, what books were being read, and what love was being shared by a family who knew only hugs instead of beatings. With all my heart, I prayed that some day that life would be mine.”⁴⁷

Three points are crucial in the quote above. First of all, she depicts America through materiality that she believes can yield comfort which her Vietnam lacks. A house, a Christmas tree, ornaments, food, games, book – these all represent the American Dream, a typically constructed image of America and its culture. Secondly, she draws a clear binary between America and Vietnam by contrasting outside and inside, darkness and brightness, coldness and warmth respectively. Thirdly, she explicitly expresses her eagerness to go “inside” that house as the symbol of her yearning to embrace American culture, or to be converted. As she later confesses, “My dreams were one way to escape the fear ... of the present darkness that engulfed us day and night during the war between the north and the south.” This suggests that the assimilation process did not wait until Vietnamese people immigrated to America after the war; in contrast, it occurred much earlier. In this case, Vu herself embraces Christianity and simultaneously begins the process of becoming American, I would argue. She, by all means, internalizes American

⁴⁷ Ibid., 168-9.

values in many events she mentions in her memoir, especially her love and married life. So the converted Vu is a Christian who cherishes American culture.

At this point, it is necessary to make a connection between the grandfather's conversion to Christianity and the author's embrace of American culture. Her grandfather was exposed to Christianity by a missionary, and the author was introduced to American culture by Americans and with the presence of American culture in Vietnam during the war. What does this have to say in relation to the history of Vietnam? To me, it is an indication of the colonization process, in which certain aspects of the colonizer's culture - such as religion - are imposed upon the colonized. However, given the fact that Vu recounts her grandfather's experience as well as hers in this memoir as a privilege, this experience then performs as an advantage for the author as well as her family member to be culturally prepared – and perhaps, financially prepared -- before going to the U.S. as refugees. In other words, this is an indication of their condition as anticipatory refugees according to Kunz's classification.

When Vu finally comes to America, her very first boyfriend is an American student, with whom (she thought) she made her friends become “green with envy”. She later marries Philip Sawyer, an American artist; a marriage that she considers one of the “strange harmonies”. She also took his last name as hers; something that no real Vietnamese woman does.⁴⁸ In other words, by marrying Philip, she marries herself to the culture he represents despite the opposition of her parents. At this point, the conversion is complete, and that is also when we find her in the post-conversion stage being a Vietnamese American who ultimately does everything to be identified as a real American although she has to go through so many difficulties and obstacles.

⁴⁸ Unlike women in many Western cultures, Vietnamese women retain their last name after being married.

The conversion here happens gradually, both in Vietnamese and in American contexts. So what is the role of religion in Vu's case as an immigrant to the U.S? Does it reflect the same reality as it does in the way religious conversions of Vietnamese immigrants are perceived? According to Rutledge, it is commonly accepted that most Vietnamese immigrants became converted to Christianity or any other belief systems when they arrived in the U.S. as "a strategy to obtain material needs." The Vietnamese, as refugee people, were forced to flee without the majority of their material possessions. Although some of the refugees were able to bring a portion of their monies or property, many left with little or nothing. For that reason, material needs such as shelter, food, clothing, and living expense became a matter of survival.

In order to meet this need, Vietnamese people accepted the help of established churches and charities, and some "converted" to the particular belief system that was furnishing the assistance. This conversion, however, often proved to be an expression of gratitude or simply a strategy for survival.⁴⁹

This no doubt is the reality. Actually, in *Song of Saigon*, Vu does mention the help of a Christ Church in Chicago when her family first arrived in America. The churches are among those voluntary organizations that help sponsor Vietnamese refugees; as a result, many immigrants became converted. However, in Vu's case and in many others as well, her whole family had been converted before coming to the U.S. and hence, Christianity to them was a part of their identity already. Thus, religion is more than "a strategy to obtain material needs" for many Vietnamese immigrants. It is also an aspect of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic self-identity. As noted by Min Zhou and Carl L. Bankston when examining a community of Vietnamese Americans in

⁴⁹ Rutledge, *The Role of Religion in Ethnic Self-Identity*, 57.

Versailles Village, New Orleans, many immigrants came to the U.S as Catholics, Protestants or Buddhists and they soon established their own religious organizations. According to Zhou and Bankston, “Given its centrality, the church serves as a primary mechanism for integrating young people into the community’s system of ethnic relations. Theoretically, we thus argue that the involvement with ethnic religious institutions can strengthen ethnic identification while also reaffirming ethnic affiliation.”⁵⁰ Hence, religion can be deployed as a means for self-description, and with many Vietnamese immigrants, it has been part of their identity. This is explicitly indicated in Vu’s proclamation of her faith and her Christianity. When she was asked by an American, “When did you hear the Good News and become a Christian?” she automatically answered, “Before I was born.”⁵¹

In brief, with two conversion narratives in her memoir, Vu depicts her life and her grandfather’s in the light of Christianity. While her grandfather’s story is permeated with the Providence of God, hers is more directed towards assimilation. Religion plays two different roles here. In the case of her grandfather, it is the salvation for his depraved soul. However, in Vu’s case, it is the opening door that leads her to a different culture, one that she yearns to embrace and to convert/adapt into. Religion, Christianity, in Vu’s depiction of her life, becomes a bridge that helps her pass from Vietnamese culture to American culture and finally it becomes part of her identity. Also, the conversions that happened to both the grandfather and the author herself are brought about by wars.

⁵⁰ Zhou and Bankston, *Growing Up American*, 99.

⁵¹ Sawyer and Proctor, *Song of Saigon*, 268.

However, does Vu's conversion takes place smoothly? Does she encounter any difficulties? Where is she on that bridge? Why does she construct her memoir in such a way? These questions cannot be answered satisfactorily using the conversion paradigm that Bjorklund suggests because the process that happened to Vu was more complicated than that. Besides, although I have argued that the time treatment and the deployment of a conversion narrative by the author depict the anticipatory condition under which the author came to the U.S, her adaptation process that happened in America needs explication. I assert that the examination of the strategies she uses offers insight into the difficulties and obstacles that the author has to deal with in order to represent her identity as a Vietnamese American of the 1.5 generation.

Diane Bjorklund argues:

The autobiographical self-portrait is responsive to shared understanding about how "good" or "normal" persons should act what commands respect from others. Autobiographers generally use rhetorical strategies to compare themselves to normative standards and persuade readers that they embody at least some virtues or "human excellences": wit, intelligence, modesty, sensitivity, practicality, generosity, truthfulness, insight, and so forth.⁵² The autobiography serves as a tool to accomplish such an end even if this is not its author's conscious intention.⁵³

Just like any other memoir, *Song of Saigon* serves as a representation of a self; and in this case, it is the self of a young girl fighting her battle to identify herself in a new land. We readers can see

⁵² Author's note: for a review of psychological studies of the development of self-understanding, see Damon and Hart (1988).

⁵³ Bjorklund, *Interpreting the Self*, 20.

what Bjorklund suggests resonates in Vu's memoir. However, Vu's representation is achieved mostly through the portrait of her family members perhaps for a reason – despite her being an American, she started as a Vietnamese who treasures collectivism. It is interesting to notice how her identity is represented and to learn that the writer is now a woman in her fifties writing about her life. In our Vietnamese culture, with the heritage and values steeped in feudalism, it is traditional to ask a person, “Who is your father?” or “Who is your grandfather?” when we first meet. The treatment towards the person will depend on the answer to the questions. In other words, the cultural norm is that you tell me who your father or your grandfather is before anyone can decide who you are. Zhou and Bankston notice, “In Vietnam, the extended family, tightly knit kinship networks, and deeply rooted traditions prevail, leaving little room for individualism. The individual is considered part of the extended family, and the individual self is treated as part of the family rather than as the self's own.”⁵⁴ That perhaps is the reason why Vu dedicates a considerable part of her memoir to talking about her grandparents and her parents. By default, they constitute part of her identity, so talking about them simultaneously means talking about herself.

In portraying her grandfather, she also applies the same technique by not mentioning him directly as she writes, “For generations, the men in his family had been celebrated for their academic prowess, a legacy nurtured in his ancestral village, Hanh Thien, whose very name drew gasps of recognition and reverence. In the not-so-distant past, his forebears had been rulers of Tonkin, judges and governors, whose names were known throughout the northern region.”⁵⁵ It

⁵⁴ Zhou and Bankston, *Growing up American*, 165

⁵⁵ Sawyer and Proctor, *Song of Saigon*, 22-3.

can be inferred that the idea of individual identity can only be understood within the context of a whole network of kinship. This also reflects the indirectness of communicative norms in Vietnamese culture. One can speak about oneself through the self of others, by which I mean when Vu writes about her forbearers, she writes about herself. In other words, this is the manifestation of one's self through others.

The question is why does Vu choose to depict herself in such a manner? In my opinion, she wants to show one of the "virtues" that Bjorklund mentions in the quote above. In our Vietnamese culture, it is a virtue to consider oneself as a part of one's family or one's community. So it is necessary for Vu to have her identity established in relation to her family's history if she wants to be recognized as a Vietnamese or at least to claim her origin as a Vietnamese, which apparently she does when incorporating into her account of life so many details about her ancestors.

However, this approach of depiction reveals the tension in the voices speaking in the memoir – that of a Vietnamese origin with tradition and collectivism, and that of an American identity with assimilation and individualism. These two voices speak at the same time in this text, and thus manifest the struggle the author has been going through in representing her desired identity. While the conversion – anticipatory condition – allows her to have a smoother transition from being Vietnamese to American, it plays as an obstacle against her desire to show the "virtue" above.

In fact, she has always been caught between Christianity and ancient fears, between past and present, between herself and others right from the beginning of her effort to adapt. For instance, when talking about her family's belief, she recalls a paradox between what they learn

from Christianity and what they are imprisoned in by the tradition. “Although both my parents professed a belief in God,” Vu writes, “they were also captive to these ancient fears, which they had passed down to us as an inheritance that dominated our lives. Whatever understanding they might have had of God’s mercy and grace – a grace that allows for differences, mistakes, and forgiveness of sin – never reached our ears. Instead, what they communicated to me most of all during my childhood was fear. This fear was a kind of parasite that thrived in the destruction of all good things, especially relationships.”⁵⁶ Of course, Vu has to struggle with that paradox between grace and fear in relation to her own life and others as well.

Another example is her relationship with Philip who later becomes her husband. Her identification with American helps her to recognize the beauty in Philip’s manner despite his being suspected as “gay” by her friends and as an outsider by her family. At the same time, that leads her to confrontation with her family. In particular, she has to face the objection from her parents who want their daughter to have an arranged marriage with a decent and well-to-do Vietnamese. They keep introducing her to many people who are “usually older” and are “always successful doctors or lawyers or engineers.” Only after they realize that she is a “rejected bride” (the name she calls herself after so many unsuccessful meetings), do they finally give up and grant her permission marry Philip. Obviously, Vu feels the clash between conforming to the Vietnamese traditional culture and the more individualized self identity associated with America, between living for her family and living her own life. She writes, “All my life, I had felt boxed in by the pressure to conform, and I had lost a little of myself each day because of it.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Ibid., 132.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

So what is going on here? We are exposed to a Vietnamese American of the 1.5 generation whose conflict never seems to resolve, and whose identity never seems to be stable. There has always been a force that pulls her away from what she wants to cling to. In Vietnam, it was the missionaries, and the American dreams to which they were exposed. In America, it's the fear, the tradition represented in the soul of her parents. The term "1.5 generation" reveals it all. It is neither first nor second generation. That she was born in Vietnam and came to America at an early age gives her this liminal space. In other words, she has always lived in the so-called "bi-cultural" environment both in Vietnam and in America. The paradox lies in the fact that once in Vietnam; she yearned for America and vice versa. She simultaneously finds herself as insider and outsider in both cultures. Therefore, she seems to go back and forth between the cultural borders. Indeed, Vu's desire to go back to Vietnam later towards the end of her memoir is just as desperate as her desire to be in the U.S. twenty five years before. And she goes back as a missionary, interestingly, and uses herself and her religion as a means to reconcile the two cultures or to reconcile the conflicts in herself, but chooses not to cross either borders. I agree with Rutledge that "Religion, then, become the bridge the Vietnamese use to walk back and forth between the two contact cultures."⁵⁸ She remains both Vietnamese and American living in this new "intermittent time and interstitial space."⁵⁹ With religion, the author engages increasingly complex ways of understanding and articulating her migrant and ethnic identity by choosing a transnational position, one that is neither purely assimilationist nor oppositional. It can also be inferred from the structure of the memoir with two separate parts dedicated to the writer's forbearers and herself, recounting both histories and personal stories that Vu wants to embrace

⁵⁸ Rutledge, *The Role of Religion in Ethnic Self-Identity*, 74.

⁵⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 312.

both past and present, both darkness and brightness, both coldness and warmth, and both Vietnam and America. Although that places her always in-between, it has already been her life and her identity, which I believe is the reason for her to construct the memoir in such a way.

In conclusion, *Song of Saigon* offers significant ways with which identity is represented. In the first analysis, it is helpful to help read religious conversion into cultural conversion. The memoir shows how immigrants experience religion as a means to assimilate, and as a means to maintain their identity at the same time. It also points out the fact that the assimilation process started right in the sending country, Vietnam, with the accessibility of the receiving country, the USA, and thus, the identity is somewhat pre-constructed under the circumstance of war. The conversion reflected in the content and the timeline of the narrative also denotes the characteristic of the author and her family members as anticipatory refugees. In the second analysis of the self, the memoir recounts a transformation process of not only one but three generations from Vietnamese into Vietnamese-American, and from war to peace. It accommodates both past and present, and both collectivism and individualism. In other words, the memoir is the manifestation of a conflicting self, a self that finds no place that is home, or everywhere as home, a self that keeps moving back and forth and a self that remains in this liminal space which is termed as 1.5 generation. All in all, the anticipatory condition does help the author with a smoother transition process, but it also plays as a hindrance against her effort to comply with her origin. This makes *Song of Saigon* a unique representation of identity by a Vietnamese American of the 1.5 generation.

CHAPTER II: IMAGINED SPACES IN *THE GANGSTER WE ARE ALL LOOKING FOR*

by le thi diem thuy

In Vietnamese, the word for *water* and the word for *a nation, a country*, and *a homeland* are one and the same: *nu' o' c*.

...

When I decided to publish under my full name (in the Vietnamese fashion) and all in lower case (because I prefer the way it runs), I knew that both Americans and Vietnamese may find fault with it; it is not how names go in either country. Nonetheless, it felt right to me; I had finally managed to break the name down, rebuild it and reclaim it as my own.

...

At night I watched as the shape of my hand kept changing in the dark. Here are five fingers. I made a fist. I made the mouth of a hungry bird. I made scissors. I held my hand in front of me. It was a page, a picture. I pulled it away, turned it around, and brought it back. It became another page, another picture. It was a door. I opened and closed it. There was a creaky hinge. I licked the side of my little finger and everything was quiet again. Two fingers in the air were feet running uphill. My hand curving backward was a dive into deep water.⁶⁰

The Gangster We Are All Looking For written by le thi diem thuy is an acclaimed memoir which describes the life of a Vietnamese family in America through the knowing eyes of a child who is finding her place and voice in a new country. Embedded in the stories are cultural values that are challenged in the process of adaptation to a new environment experienced by the so-called boat people after the America-Vietnam war.

⁶⁰ le thi diem thuy, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* (New York: Random House, 2003), 62.

The story starts with the year 1987 when six refugees – a girl, her father Ba, and four “uncles” – were pulled from the sea and received by an American family to begin a new life in San Diego. Though the host had died before their arrival, his son supported the newcomers. In exchange for their stay, they helped with the painting and the maintenance of the house.

While the adults have their own concerns, the little girl also struggles with her traumas. She yearns for her mother who was accidentally left behind and lives with mental struggles in the strange, new country that feeds her imagination. She starts to see and hear things intensely and dramatically out of her loneliness. Then one day, in an effort to release a butterfly, which she believes was trapped and calling for help, she breaks the souvenirs of her sponsor. As a result, the whole group is kicked out of the house without anyone in the new country to fall back on.

The story continues with her mother, Ma, coming into the picture. We do not know when and how she came. The only thing we know is that Ma’s appearance does not help much with the girl’s distress. The financial burden, the haunting traumas and the constant moving make each member in the family more miserable in their own tragedy. Ma keeps lamenting her sorrow of letting her parents down by her marriage to Ba, who is a Buddhist and a gangster from the South of Vietnam. Meanwhile, Ba is consumed in his hopeless rage with the haunting memory of his son and daughter who drowned in an attempt to escape and his desperate situation in the new country. Worst of all, the surviving girl has to cope with her new life in all of those tragedies. She ends up fleeing from her parents, apparently after being beaten by her Ba, but still in her heart there is a place for love, hope and good memories.

The Gangster We Are All Looking For is told in five interlocking stories, each one composed of a series of brief, sharply drawn vignettes. Details of how the author’s parents met,

how they were parted before the trip and reunited, how her brother and then her sister drowned, how she and her father spent their first days in America waiting for her mother to come, and how they navigate through the difficulties to survive in America are treated in a non-chronological order. We see a story with a movie-like structure in which past and present intermingle. Time and place and viewpoint shift constantly, as memories of Vietnam are interwoven with incidents in the United States. Past and present blended helps convey the fluidity of time itself. Instead of conventional storytelling, juxtaposition and association move the narrative forward. Also, the disjunctions of the events, which sometimes appear to disengage the readers, add to the effect of creating additional space for imagination.

If in *Song of Saigon*, time is linear -- presented in a chronological order -- in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, time is disruptive, with constant shifts from past to present and present to past through flashbacks. The shifting of time concurs with the shifting of space in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*. If *Song of Saigon* gives a full account of the author's life and even traces back to the life of the author's precedent -- the grandfather, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* gives only patches of the author's life events, leaving room for readers' guess and engagement. Therefore, in the following discussion, I am addressing time deployment in the text as well as the text's form and its content. I argue that the disruptive/non-linear timeline in the text helps depict the acute condition of the author and her family as refugees as it shows chaos and disorderliness. Also, I assert that the author uses her imagination constantly in the text as an imagined site on which she can represent her identity.

In five sections that read like a movie of the narrative, le thi diem thuy does not seem to care much about temporal issues, or along with it spatial issues. She brings readers back and

forth between present and past, here and there with her train of thoughts, making it so challenging for readers to really concentrate. I cannot help reading it as a mobility narrative given the constant movements that the text embodies. By reading it as a mobility narrative using time and place as indicators, I assert that the text reflects her condition as an acute refugee.

The writer starts her narrative:

Linda Vista, with its rows of yellow houses, is where we eventually washed to shore. Before Linda Vista, we lived in the Green Apartment on Thirtieth and Adams, in Normal Heights. Before the Green Apartments, we lived in the Red Apartment on Forty-ninth and Orange, in East San Diego. Before the Red Apartment we weren't a family like we are a family now. We were in separate places, waiting for each other. Ma was standing on a beach in Vietnam while Ba and I were in California with four men who had escaped with us on the same boat.⁶¹

Or when she recounts her experience of being dragged from one place to another, she recalls:

I fly over the streets and the stations that we passed through. I fly over the coastline of our town in Vietnam. I see the boat pulling away from the shore. ... I see us standing at the small fountain in that park in downtown San Diego. We are waiting among the sleeping homeless for the Federal Building to open so we can apply for our "papers."⁶²

⁶¹ le, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, 3.

⁶² Ibid., 123.

These narrative tense and place shifts are by no means unique in the whole text. If we follow the lines, at one time, we are in America during the late 70s, and then all of a sudden, we are in a Northern village in Vietnam during the war in the 60s. Moreover, readers can see the shift between the paragraphs, which yields no normally logical order. What does this strategy say about the construction of the text, and the self through the text? According to Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, “we are accustomed to thinking of narrative structure as temporally organized, but in a mobility narrative, place names and the way they are sequenced could also be indices of narrative structure, for mobility by definition involves changes in both temporal and spatial dimension.”⁶³ She argues that mobility on any reasonably large scale would generate a map, a spatial correlate of completed and contemplated moves as well as a representation of one’s mental patterning of the world. In the case of *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, a “fictional map” is drawn. It covers Vietnam and America, past and present, hardship and struggle, trauma and haunting ghosts, all of which are embedded in a constant movement. Readers move with the story (or with the author) from one place to another, from America to Vietnam, from now to then in no time. I read that as a map that shows an unstable vision of the physical world, one that keeps changing, and is insecure. Interestingly enough, this echoes Wong’s observation about the experience of mainstream Americans and Asian Americans:

One striking difference presents itself upon even the most cursory comparison between mainstream and Asian American discourse on mobility. In the former, horizontal movement across the North American continent regularly connotes independence, freedom, and opportunity for individual actualization and/or societal

⁶³ Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (New Jersey : Princeton University Press, 1993), 129.

renewal – in short, Extravagance. In the latter, however, it is usually associated with subjugation, coercion, impossibility of fulfillment for self or community – in short, Necessity.”⁶⁴

I find le thi diem thuy’s individual experience resonates with Wong’s observation above, although Wong’s ideas cover a larger scale of the issue. To le thi diem thuy, the mobility she has physically and mentally experienced must have been for “Necessity,” the necessity for a stable residence, a peaceful state of mind and a recognizable self; things that she has lost due to the war and the obsession it left behind.

However, the idea of “mobility” has different meanings for different populations. I am looking into the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American in particular, and to the conditions under which they came to the U.S. le thi diem thuy does mention these conditions in her narrative. She remembers:

Ba and I were connected to the four uncles, not by blood but by water. The six of us had stepped into the South Sea together. Along with other people from our town, we floated across the sea, first in the hold of the fishing boat, and then in the hold of a U.S. Navy ship. At the refugee camp in Singapore, we slept on beds side by side and when our papers were processed and stamped, we packed our few possessions and left the camp together. We entered the revolving doors of airports and boarded plane after plane. We were lifted high over the Pacific Ocean. Holding on to one another, we moved through clouds, ghost vapors, time zones. On the other side, we walked through a light rain and climbed into a car together. We were carried

⁶⁴ Wong, *Reading Asian American Literature*, 121.

through unfamiliar brightly lit streets, and delivered to the sidewalk in front of a darkened house whose door we entered, after climbing five uneven steps together in what had become pouring rain.⁶⁵

It can be inferred from the passage above that they are Vietnamese boat people, who were forced to leave Vietnam because of their intolerance with the Communist regime; they are people who went out in search of freedom and a better life without knowing where they would end up.

Unlike the author in *Song of Saigon* who obviously has connection with the American people prior to her arrival in the U.S. and has a much better preparation, the protagonist in this memoir is in an uncertain circumstance, being brought to the sea and floating to nowhere if it had not been for the fishing boat and the U.S. Navy ship. Paradoxically, at the beginning, she recounts her miserable Vietnamese refugee's experience in just one short paragraph, glossing over the traumas, the time, the people, the bumps on the way and the memories only to have to go back and deal with them now and then in the whole narrative. What does this have to say? To me, such haste in time treatment denotes the haste in her departing from Vietnam. Such a simple way of narrating her extremely rich and emotional experience resonates the spare preparation for her departure. In other words, the whole scenario portrays her condition as acute refugee, to use Kunz's classification.

In a nutshell, using the form of a mobility narrative with fluidity of time and place, le thi diem thuy is able to represent her state of mind or, to use Wong's word, her "mental patterning of the world," one that is unstable and occupied with so many troubles, one that challenges the

⁶⁵ le, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, 3-4.

notion of normative, linear timeline. Simultaneously, her condition as an acute refugee is revealed in those chaotic and disorderly nuances of time and space.

Moving to a deeper analysis of this narrative, according to Rocio G. Davis, to engage the narrative effectively, we must move beyond an analytical model of merely reading the surface of texts for potential meanings and attend to the cultural and generic codes addressed by the authors to unravel what the texts execute within the contexts of larger questions of cultural and political mobilization.⁶⁶ Throughout the narrative, the dominant theme of mobility – the shifting of time and space – echoes in such a way that one cannot help but read it as imagined spaces. In the following discussion, I am dealing with this particular topic considering different domains – the text itself as an imagined site in which the author identifies herself and the spaces the authors creates in her imagination for her identity while growing up in America with a heritage and memories of war and trauma from Vietnam.

First of all, I argue that *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is deployed as an imaginative site where the author can represent her fragmented self. Rocio G. Davis points out that “[t]he self of the text frequently becomes the self *as* the text – the narrative strategies used reflect particular forms of perceiving and/or performing subjectivity. Selfhood in life writing is thus understood as a narrative performance, and the text often exhibits the writer's process of self awareness and struggle for self-representation through the narrative structure itself.”⁶⁷ So what kind of text does le thi diem thuy construct? Which narrative strategies does the author use? In

⁶⁶ Rocio G. Davis, “Begin Here - a Critical Introduction to the Asian American Childhood” in *Transnational Asian American Literature - Sites and Transit*, ed. S. G.-I. Lim ...[et all.], 164 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

⁶⁷ Rocio G. Davis, “The Self in the Text versus the Self as Text: Asian American Autobiographical Strategies” in *Asian American Literary Studies*, ed. Guiyou Huang, 42 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005).

terms of genre, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* as a memoir has the characteristics of an autofiction, defined by Smith and Watson as a sub-genre of life writing.⁶⁸ I argue that is employed deliberately by the author as a way to identify and to represent her self.

Autofiction is a novel that reads like a memoir or vice versa. Obviously, we can see that through le thi diem thuy's carefully constructed account. The prose is guarded, as if the stories are too private for telling - or would anger still-living parents. The writer deliberately takes out details that are too personal, leaving a space for readers' imaginations; and as readers, we cannot help but ask questions. For instance, when talking about the cause of her running away from home, she gives us this haunting image, "the shapes his fists left along a wall; the bruises that blossomed on the people around him." What happens? Does she get hit? Why? We are obliged to put similar questions with many other events she describes in this account about her parents' marriage, her brother's and sister's deaths, as well as her own life after running away. All constitute a mosaic with different shapeless patches of colors representing fragmented memories. Almost all the important events in her life are displayed in the narrative; however, they are like phantoms that make us obsessed without a direct appearance. Thus, her story has never been a see-through story for us because although we are exposed to the crucial events in her life, we

⁶⁸ This is the French term for autobiographical fiction, or fiction narrative in the first person-mode. Ultimately, the attempt to distinguish "autobiography" from "autobiographical fiction" may, as Paul Jay argues, be "pointless" (16) "for if by 'fictional' we mean 'made up,' 'created,' or 'imagined' – something, that is, which is literary and not 'real' – then we have merely defined the ontological status of any text, autobiographical or not" (16). Despite the difficulty of fixing the boundary between fiction and autobiography, the reader comes to an autobiographical text with the expectation that the protagonist is a person living in the experiential world, not a fictional character, and that the narrative will be a transparent, truthful view of that world. But, as the autofiction of Roland Barthes in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975) and others in France in the 1970s suggests, no definitive truth about the past self may be available. The referential "real" assumed to be "outside" a text cannot be written; the subject is inescapably an unstable fiction; and the autobiography-fiction boundary remain illusory. While autobiographical story-telling employs fictional tactics and genres, however, autofiction uses textual markers that signal a deliberate, often ironic, interplay between the two modes (Smith and Watson, 186).

never have an explanation for them. This differs so much from the accounts that Anh Vu Sawyer in *Song of Saigon* reveals through her memoir, which, to me, is very straightforward.

From an Asian and a Vietnamese perspective, I see her deployment of autofiction as a way for her to keep the face of the family, to negotiate between telling her life story and not hurting her family members. The Vietnamese have a saying, “Xau che, tot khoe,” which basically means that we tend to show off good deeds and hide bad ones. In this case, violence, trauma, conflicts, and perhaps family background do not count as good things. Interestingly, in the case of *Song of Saigon*, we learn that the author is from a privileged family whose ancestors are high-ranking officers in the village or in the French-supported government, something one may take pride in. Thus, it is understandable that she can expose her family’s background without hesitation in such a transparent and free manner. In the case of *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, the author, le thi diem thuy, does not have that same comfort. According to her account, her father used to be a gangster in Vietnam; her mother came from a decent family but was rejected due to her marriage, and they had to leave Vietnam for America in the worst condition. Those are not things one can cherish. However, they are part of her identity, an identity that is as dramatic as a fiction itself based on what she has been through, and an identity that is still struggling in a confined relationship between her individual self and her family’s. Therefore, I would argue that the genre of autofiction is a strategic site for her to represent her identity; while she does expose things that she is not supposed to, autofiction enables her to do so in a restricted manner.

Secondly, I posit that le thi diem thuy creates her own identity through the images and silent sounds which constitute imagined space in the text. This compensates for the loss she has

been through during the assimilation process. In fact, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* embodies in itself a struggle of Vietnamese children, as outsiders, to integrate into the American mainstream, with only a vague conception of what their original culture was. The traumatic experience in the war, the escape, as well as the battle she has to fight every day in her life, enhances the difficulties she faces in integrating. Her comfort zone is the imagination; spaces of her own in which she can establish a self and find her own voice despite the marginalization she has to face.

According to Davis, often the desire to participate in society is defeated by marginalization, a history of racial discrimination, heightening the child's sense of indeterminacy in a nation from whose history he or she has been excluded. Interestingly, much of the difficulty for many of these Asian Americans lies in the gap between their perceptions of themselves and their encounters with the gaze of the mainstream white observer.⁶⁹ In *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, the child's first experience with marginalization takes place on her first day at school:

I was the only Vietnamese student in my school. ...As I stood before them in a dress the color of an Easter egg, with my feet encased in clear plastic sandals, the other students looked at the globe and then back at me again. Some whispered

⁶⁹ Davis, Rocio G. Davis, "Begin Here - a Critical Introduction to the Asian American Childhood" in *Transnational Asian American Literature - Sites and Transit*, ed. S. G.-I. Lim ...[et all.], 171 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006).

behind their hands. Some just stared. I imagined the stripes on my underwear flashing on and off, like traffic signals, under the dress.⁷⁰

This setting has a lot to say. She seems to be out of place. First of all, she is a stranger to the rest of the class. The strangeness is expressed in her Vietnamese body with the American Easter-egg-color dress on. By excluding herself as “the only Vietnamese student” in her school, she shows the marginalization she felt in her first encounter with the new culture. And it creates a sense of loss, the loss of a self. After all, she is a Vietnamese who is wearing an American outfit. Does that make her American? Does that make her part of the crowd? Or does it make her feel lost in it? She is completely out of place in her attempt to assimilate. In other words, she was rejected, at least in her own interpretation.

Being rejected by the dominant culture in the very first effort to assimilate (she agreed to go to school), the author fails to find her legitimate self again. In my opinion, the assimilation process involves both the preservation of the old values and the adoption of new set of values from the dominant culture. However, in what Anne Anlin Cheng calls “the melancholy of race” (of the marginalized, racialized people), the rejection of oneself in the process is more salient.⁷¹ Cheng explains:

When we turn to the long history of grief and the equally protracted history of physically and emotionally managing that grief on the part of the marginalized,

⁷⁰ *le, The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, 19

⁷¹ Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race : Psychoanalysis, Assimilation and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

In this book, she discusses the melancholy of the marginalized/racialized immigrants in the assimilation into the American dominant culture – “the melancholy of race” suggesting that in integrating into the dominant culture, one who belongs to a marginalized group tends to negate oneself along the process in many ways.

racialized people, we see that there has always been an interaction between melancholy in the vernacular sense of affect, as “sadness” or the “blues”, and the melancholia in the sense of a structural, identificatory formation predicated on -- while being an active negotiation of -- the loss of self as legitimacy. Indeed, racial melancholia as I am defining it has always existed for raced subjects both as a sign of rejection and as a psychic strategy in response to that rejection.⁷²

I see that rejection in the protagonist’s inner world, the world of her mind. She signals the loss of herself by identifying with her drowned brother. ““Hey boy, Upside down, you look like a boy. You look like the brother of ...’ And she said my name,” the writer recalls the incident when her best friend Anh talked to her about the author’s drowned brother.⁷³ And if she does not identify herself with someone else, she will find herself running:

It was spring when the man saw me; the jacarandas bloomed, blanketing the sidewalks with small purple flowers.⁷⁴ I felt that I had to continue running, at least through the summer. I hadn’t yet found a way to return to where my parents waited, in that house that was on fire. As it turned out, I ran past the summer and into another fall, another spring, another summer, and I kept on running.⁷⁵

⁷² Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 20.

⁷³ Ie, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, 71.

⁷⁴ The author’s father

⁷⁵ Ie, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, 102.

Such identifications of the protagonist derive from either the haunting memories of the trauma she went through in the war and her escape out of Vietnam or the everyday battle she has to fight in her family. By identifying with the dead brother or by running away, she rejects the cultural milieu that her parents represent and perhaps expect her to represent. In other words, she denies the heritage that she finds embarrassing and traumatic because that causes her being marginalized.

Such struggles and conflicts result in the constant feeling of loss, one that, unfortunately, keeps occurring in her life over and over again. She loses her country because of the war. She loses her brother and her sister because of the treacherous escape out of Saigon. She loses her first shelter in America because of the obsession that she develops with the animated animals, stemming from her traumatic memories of the war. She imagined that she was the butterfly strapped in the dish; she wanted to free the butterfly, and thus free herself. She then loses her stable home (if any) with having been evicted many times. She continues to lose her peace of mind because of the family's situation with her father's desperate rage and the mother's constant mourning. The loss reaches the climax when she runs away, probably after being hit by her father, which means she loses a family and her self-confidence in life.

To her, all start with the war, something she recounts with sorrow:

Ma says war is a bird with a broken wing flying over the countryside, trailing blood and burying crops in sorrow. If something grows in spite of this, it is both a curse and a miracle. When I was born, she cried to know that it was war I was breathing in, and she could never shake it out of me. Ma says war makes it dangerous to breathe, though she knows you die if you don't. She says she could have thrown me

against the wall, until I broke or coughed up this war that is killing us all. She could have stomped on it in the dark, and danced on it like a madwoman dancing on gravestones. She could have ground it down to powder and spat on it, but didn't I know? War has no beginning and no end. It crosses oceans like a splintered boat filled with people singing a sad song.⁷⁶

So war follows her from Vietnam to America and she ends up having so many voids created by war. One might ask what does she fill these voids with? My own answer is imagination or a creation of imagined space.

Arriving in the U.S. at the age of six, the girl's only image of her motherland, Vietnam "is a black-and-white photograph of my grandparents sitting in bamboo chairs in their front courtyard. They are sitting tall and proud, surrounded by chickens and roosters."⁷⁷ We readers are exposed to an imagined space here. The space is one of an ocean apart. To me, it is imaginary because it is constructed in the irrelevance of time. The author basically lets her memory revisit the place through a photograph, and thus creates a sense of something with an unreal and ghostly existence. After all, the image is the embodiment of her lost homeland, the loss from the war. Indeed, according to Nguyen Viet Thanh:

Photographs are the secular imprints of ghosts, the most visible signs of their aura, and the closest many in the world of refugees could come to living with those left behind. For many refugees the clothes on their backs and a wallet full of pictures were all they carried with them on their flight. In the strange new land they found

⁷⁶ Ibid., 87.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 78.

themselves, these photographs transubstantiated into the symbol of missing themselves.”⁷⁸

The author here clings to that photograph as a clue to her far-away and vague origin. At the same time, she points to the fact that it is a part of her world despite the irrelevance of time and space. After all, it is her private world, her own world.

Later, when talking about the picture of her grandparents sent to her mom from Vietnam after they were dead, she observes:

When we moved my grandparents in, Ma simply lifted me up and I pushed open the attic door with one hand while, with the other, I slipped the stiff envelop with the photograph of my grandparents into the crawl space above. I pushed the envelope the length of my arm and down to my fingertips. I pushed it so far it was beyond reach. Ma said it was alright; they had to come to live with us, and sometimes you don’t need to see or touch people to know they are there.⁷⁹

Again, a space is left for imagination here. Indeed, the photograph is “beyond reach.” It exists in such a way that it does not seem to exist at all. Still, it does exist, just like what her Ma told her, ‘sometimes you don’t need to see or touch people to know they are there.’ Her Ma was satisfied with where the picture was because she did not want her husband to see. The picture is a reminder of the maltreatment he received for marrying her without her parents’ consent.

⁷⁸ Nguyen, Viet Thanh, “*Speak of the Dead, Speak of Viet Nam: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Minority Discourse*” *The New Centennial Review* 6, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 7-37.

⁷⁹ *le, The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, 94.

However, what interests me is the way the author talks about the photograph and its invisible existence in the attic. Is she talking only about her grandparents who are already dead? Or is she talking about herself and her own existence, the existence that is unseen in the new place, just like that photograph? I read this as her own imagined site of identity.

As a matter of fact, Arjun Appadurai in one of his discussions about time and space in post colonialism does mention the connection between imagination and space. He describes the spaces as “the building blocks of imagined worlds – the multiple worlds which are constituted by the historically situated imagination of persons and groups spread around the world.”⁸⁰ In this case, on the level of an individual, the protagonist in the memoir also uses her imagination to create her own world and her own identity through the construction of space.

That space then in turn portrays the author’s state of mind. Often, she gets lost and absorbed in her own creation. Such a space in her mind always comes with a border that divides the world into two parts, a zone that should be broken through. She is trapped in that liminal terrain between the two borders most of the time. For instance, she recounts one of her experiences during the very first days arriving in the U.S and staying in an isolated room:

I began to play with the ceiling, a game that I used to play with the sky when I was lying in the fishing boat on the sea. At that time, I thought that everyone and everything I missed was hovering behind the sky. The game involved looking for a seam to the sky, a thread I could pull. I told myself that if I could find the thread and focus on it hard enough with my eyes, I could tear the sky open and my mother,

⁸⁰ Arjun Appadurai, “*Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy*” *Public Culture* 2 (1990): 2-3.

my brother, my grandfather, my flip-flops, my favorite shells, would all fall down to me.⁸¹

This reads like a fairy tale. What seems to be impossible in real life is possible here in her childhood game. Actually, it is the game of her life, the game she plays when she is in the middle of nowhere, in a transition zone waiting to be accepted. That sky and that ceiling perform as a barrier that needs pulling down. That space in her imagination is the whole world to her.

Another example occurs when she finds out about the dish with a butterfly in it. She recalls telling her father:

When Ba and I lay down to sleep one night, I whispered into Ba's ear, "I found a butterfly that has a problem."

"What is the problem?" Ba asked.

"The butterfly is alive ..."

"Good," Ba said.

"But it's trapped."

"Where?"

"Inside a glass disk."

Ba said nothing.

"But it wants to get out."

⁸¹ le, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, 21.

“How do you know?”

“Because it said to me: ‘Shuh-shuh/shuh-shuh.’”⁸²

Here, she is a trapped butterfly that needs releasing, at least in her imagination whereas before, she is someone who wants to crack open the sky to enlarge the space. In both cases, the thirst for a place with more freedom and comfort is obvious. However, what does it mean? In my opinion, the marginalization leaves her no comfort zone. And that urges her to create her own space. Perhaps she needs a transformation because “the spatialisation of being involves a spatial articulation and deployment of the notion of transformation: space as the milieu of becoming, a scalar event,” as Grossberg once put.⁸³ However, the girl finds everything related to her present state problematic. In the first case, it is a lack of connection with her beloveds – her mother, her grandfather, and her belongings – her culture in a way; while in the second one, it is the lack of freedom of mind in the new land. There is a sense of incompleteness, of some sort of unfulfilled state and a sense of loss – “the loss of self as legitimacy.”⁸⁴ Such a transformation cannot be completed; thus the imagination of spaces and the assimilation process continue. She, as someone who does not belong to anywhere, is trying to adapt with a traumatic experience in a not-so-friendly place.

The loss also manifests itself in the sound of silence that *le thi diem thuy* creates in her work. That silence is unique to me in the sense that it denotes her existence, and it embodies

⁸² Ibid., 26

⁸³ Lawrence Grossberg, “The Space of Culture, the Power of Space”, in *The Post-Colonial Question – Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers and Lidia Curtis, 171 (New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁸⁴ Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 20.

imagination and a sense of space in it. Throughout the memoir, we do not hear her voice a lot in speeches, but the memoir is permeated with a kind of silence that tells us she is there speaking. In Vietnamese tradition, histories are told orally. le thi diem thuy chooses a different way to tell her stories – writing. However, she writes in a special way; she transcribes the silent speech into words. The silence is associated with that imagined space I discussed above because it denotes her existence and it evokes imagination as well.

Going back to the example about the trapped butterflies above, we recognize that she imagines herself as the butterflies speaking ‘Shuh-shuh/shuh-shuh.’ She recalls:

I held the disk up to my ear and listened. At first all I heard was the sound of my own breathing, but then I heard a soft rustling, like wings brushing against a windowpane. The rustling was a whispered song. It was the butterfly’s way of speaking, and I thought I understood it.⁸⁵

I interpret that it is she who is speaking from a confined space without being physically heard. She is the trapped butterflies whose voice is silenced in the new society. It is felt and recognized through the pain, the suffocating state and the imprisonment. Such audible silence can also be traced elsewhere throughout the text. For example, when she talks about her dead grandparents, she writes, “There is not a trace of blood anywhere except here, in my throat, where I am telling you all this.” Who knows what those silent sounds mean? Pain? Anger? Desperation? We are exposed to the sounds without hearing them. We are exposed to places without being able to enter and we end up with so many questions. That is why I read all the sounds in connection with places to be imaginary. To her, “The whole world is two butterfly wings rubbing against my

⁸⁵ le, *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, 25.

ears,” and the world is as imaginary as it could be.⁸⁶ The reason is simple, only in such an imagined world can she find a comfort zone for her identity and only in such an imagined world can her voice be heard.

le thi diem thuy, to me, is successful in representing her unstable identity with the movement and shifting of time and space, making the world reflect her state of mind. As a matter of fact, in that world she can also be the self she wants to be with all the haunting memories and the everlasting inner conflicts entailed by the experience of the war and her recollections of it, those she can never cope with in real life. In other words, in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For*, a mobility narrative embodies a mobility self which is revealed through an autofiction. Thus, the fundamental issue in her life writing becomes the occasion of her appropriation of autofiction, the personal mode of self-representation that allows her to tell her own story, name herself, while depicting an alternative version of life.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 99.

CHAPTER III: EATING ONE'S WAY TOWARD AN AMERICAN IDENTITY – AN ANALYSIS OF BICH MINH NGUYEN'S *STEALING BUDDHA'S DINNER*

I liked to pile my books around me in bed, moatlike, and sleep among the narratives. *Ramona Quimby*, *Encyclopedia Brown*, *The Great Brain*, *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*. *Choose Your Own Adventure*, *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, *Charlotte's Web*, *The Cay*, *The Secret Garden*, *The Chronicles of Narnia*. Then writers like Cynthia Voigt, Richard Peck, Norma Fox Mazer. I lingered over my favorite food parts – descriptions of Turkish Delight, fried chicken, hamburgers with onions, thick hot chocolate, even the beef tongue the Quimby family once had for dinner.⁸⁷

Like an additional flavor, meanings are carried with food.

-David Mass Masumoto, “*Gochisoo* and Brown Rice *Sushi*”

In the first two chapters, we have been exposed to two different narratives that reflect the different conditions under which Vietnamese Americans of the 1.5 generation came to the U.S - as anticipatory and acute refugees - and how the experiences are utilized to bolster the shape of the texts in terms of form and content. It can be argued from the discussion in Chapter I that the condition of an anticipatory refugee allows Anh Vu Sawyer in *Song of Saigon* to narrate her life story in a linear timeline and construct the text in a manner that denotes her intention to embrace both past and present. Thus, her identity as a Vietnamese American of the 1.5 generation is represented as a combination between the Vietnamese heritage that she cherishes and the

⁸⁷ Nguyen Minh Bich, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2007), 151.

American identity that she yearns for in the process of adapting to the new culture. Meanwhile, in Chapter II, the condition of an acute refugee experienced by le thi diem thuy in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* is narrated in a disruptive time scheme, reflecting the disorderliness in states of mind of the author. At the same time, the desperate condition of her family background does not allow her to celebrate it the way Anh Vu Sawyer in the first chapter does. Therefore, le thi diem thuy seeks an alternative approach to represent her identity -- through imagined spaces.

In this third chapter, I examine another life narrative, Bich Minh Nguyen's *Buddha's Dinner*, and argue that similar to the second memoir by le thi diem thuy, it demonstrates her condition as an acute refugee. The protagonist has many deep voids generated by her condition during the war and in her escaping journey to the U.S. that need filling. Above all, she craves for an American identity, which also derives from her condition as a refugee. She ended up using American food as a symbolic aspect of culture to fill up the voids, but in vain.

Stealing Buddha's Dinner begins in Grand Rapids, a Midwestern town in Michigan where Bich Minh Nguyen starts her new life as a war refugee. In 1975, after many days being transferred from one refugee camp to another, her family arrived in America in search of a better and safer life. Leaving Vietnam on one of the last boats out of Saigon, they left her mother behind, a fact disclosed much later in Bich's life. In America, despite the generosity of their sponsors, it does not take long before her family feels discrimination in their promised land.

Meanwhile, though surrounded by Vietnamese culture at home (represented by her extended family), Bich and her sister, Anh, cannot find a strong connection with their homeland and desperately want to fit in with their often unsympathetic white neighbors and classmates. Bich's grandmother, Noi, is a gentle woman and a strong believer. She keeps a shrine to Buddha

and gives her daily offering of seasonal fruits and other treats. This, to Bich, is the reminder of her Vietnamese heritage that catches her attention.

Then life gets harder for the little girl when Bich's father gets married to Rosa, a second generation Mexican American single mother. She becomes the maternal figure replacing the left-behind mother of Bich and Anh. They create a so-called blended family. In addition to bringing Crissy, her own daughter, into the family, Rosa gives birth to Bich's half brother, Vinh. Rosa, with her frugal way of living and Mexican heritage, makes Bich feel more like a stranger right in her own family.

Growing up with a Vietnamese appearance, and a sensitive, introspective nature, Bich finds more difficulties in fitting into mainstream culture than anyone else in the family. Therefore, assimilation becomes her ultimate goal. Desperate to feel, look, and be American, she convinces herself that eating American snack food advertised on T.V will make her "really American." While Shake 'n Bake, Kraft Macaroni, Pringles, and Hostess Cupcakes can't equal the homemade sticky rice cake and pho that Noi makes, in Bich's interpretation, they definitely represent the social acceptance and insider invisibility she wants. Therefore, with a continuous hunger for "American food," she tries her best to get access to the food, even to steal to eat her way toward an American identity, and to forge herself into an American from the inside out.

Yet, Bich also comes to realize that she is gaining and losing at the same time in struggling with her "otherness." She does not feel comfortable in either culture. Often, she finds herself sitting silently somewhere in the background, at home or in the classroom. Her only companions are books with descriptions of food American people eat. To the little girl, food becomes the means for her to achieve what she wants the most – an American identity, a dream she fantasizes about throughout the course of growing up in America.

As I have suggested earlier in this chapter, this memoir ultimately portrays the author as well as her family members as acute refugees. As Bich Minh Nguyen recalls, her family left Vietnam in the spring of 1975 when “everyone in Saigon knew the war was lost, and to stay meant being sent to reeducation camps, or worse. The neighbors spoke of executions and what the Communists would do to their children; they talked of people vanished and tortured – a haunting reminder of what my grandfather had endured in the North.”⁸⁸ So they left for fear, in fear, and left because they had no other choices. Like le thi diem thuy in the second memoir, Bich Minh Nguyen and her family left Vietnam by way of water and left without her mother. She writes:

This is our last chance [italics in-text]. We headed toward the Vietnamese naval headquarters, Chu Anh driving a motorbike while holding Anh in one arm, and my father on his own bike; with Noi on the back holding fast to me. They drove through the twenty-four-hour curfew and the thundering of shells. All around us people were running, dropping suitcases and clothes, trying to flag down cars.⁸⁹

This, to some extent, depicts the unpreparedness of her family when leaving the country. All they could carry with them are themselves, no belongings, no money, and perhaps no definite destination. They fled out of Vietnam leaving behind her mother, whose absence later in the U.S creates so many deep voids that need filling in the girl’s heart.

⁸⁸ Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, 4.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 5.

The acute condition can also be traced in her recounting of what happened on the ship during their journey to America. “Those days on the ship, people jostled each other to keep the small space they had claimed among the thousand or so on board. There was not enough rice or fresh water, and all around us children screamed and wailed without stopping.”⁹⁰ This is a typical experience that I observe among refugees who come from a lower family background which is among the factors that lead them to be classified as acute refugees. They usually are the last to leave the country and leave without any preparation. Thus they have no options but to rely on what U.S government designed and offered them once they arrived in the U.S.⁹¹ In Bich’s case, her family went through several refugee camps in Guam and Arkansas and the conditions were always “behind the barbed-wire, chain-link fence” with “days [stringing] themselves into months of waiting: standing in meal lines; playing cards; hoping for sponsors; sitting around the tents and barracks talking about what they had heard America was like.”

Her family finally ends up in Grand Rapids, Michigan because there is a sponsor. Talking about the place, she recalls grudgingly:

Throughout my childhood I wondered, so often it became a buzzing dullness, why we had ended up here, and why we couldn’t leave. I would stare at a map of the United States and imagine us in New York or Boston or Los Angeles. I had no idea

⁹⁰ Ibid., 6.

⁹¹ I am referring to the resettlement scheme that U.S government designed for Vietnamese refugees after 1975. For more details, see Kaplan, Choy, and Whitmore 1991; Kibria 1993; Muzny 1989; Rutledge 1985, 1992; Liu 1979; Starr and Roberts 1985.

what such cities were like, but I was convinced people were happier out on the coasts, living in a nexus between so much land and water.⁹²

What is interesting in this narrative is although it describes the condition of the author and her family as acute refugees, the disruptive timeline does not dominate the account as in the case of the second memoir. Instead, time is treated in a different way. As I read it, Bich Minh Nguyen does not seem to have an interest in dealing with her past. She quickly goes over the events in Vietnam in the first chapter, and only revisits her past in the last chapter of the book when it comes to explain her mother's re-appearance in her life. This denotes a refusal to cope with her painful and perhaps traumatic past, which, in my opinion, strengthens her acute condition.

The acute condition, however, is presented in the choice of the theme of food for her memoir by the author. To me, her choice helps with an understanding of the family background where she is from. Unlike the author in *Song of Saigon* who, thanks to her higher class, was exposed to American culture before coming to the U.S., Bich Minh Nguyen only came to know about American culture once she was physically in the country. The exposure to American culture is different in the two cases. In the former, American culture comes in the form of religion, abstract and far-away - food for the spirit. This kind of "food," I would argue, must have been reserved for certain groups of people who, in the context of Vietnamese history, did not have to worry much about their worldly existence. Meanwhile, in the latter, American culture is embodied in the physical form of food - something consumed in everyday life, something necessary for one's survival. In the case of Bich Minh Nguyen, to be American is a matter of

⁹² Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, 12

survival because of the urge to conform, and the best, quickest, and available way to do that is through food. Therefore, I argue that the protagonist picks up food as a means of adaptation to forge an identity for herself under the pressure to conform and in the yearning for a family. To her, food is not simply a need for her physical survival; it is a cultural survival, it is a representation of the self she wants to build. In other words, food shows her sense of self.

According to Deborah Lupton in *Food, the Body, and the Self*, “[f]ood and eating are central to our subjectivity or sense of self, and our experience of embodiment, or the ways that we live in and through our bodies, which itself is inextricably linked with subjectivity. As such, the meanings, discourses and practices around food and eating are worthy of detailed cultural analysis and interpretation.”⁹³ “The sense of self” is significantly manifested in *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*. Bich Minh Nguyen is always aware of a cultural force that imposes on the formation of her self, which is reflected in the following:

I came of age in the 1980s, before *diversity* and *multicultural* awareness trickled into western Michigan. Before ethnic was cool. Before Thai restaurants became staples in every town. When I think of Grand Rapids I remember city signs covered in images of rippling flags, proclaiming “An All-American City.” Throughout the eighties a giant billboard looming over the downtown freeway boasted the slogan to all who drove the three-lane S-curve. As a kid, I couldn’t figure out what “All-American” was supposed to mean. Was it a promise, a threat, a warning?⁹⁴

⁹³ Cited in Jennifer Ann Ho, *Consumption and Identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels* (New York: Rutledge, 2005), 11.

⁹⁴ Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, 10.

So there she is as a Vietnamese – an immigrant, and a representative of a minority ethnic group - in a community dominated by American culture. To her, that imposes on her the pressure of being an outsider in “An All-American City,” the pressure that leaves one no choice but to conform if they want to survive. At the beginning, although Bich was not sure about anything, Americanness never has a neutral meaning to her. Whether Americanness is “a promise,” “a threat,” or “a warning,” it will have an influence on her because it is so obviously powerful and influential. Had *diversity* and *multicultural* been recognized, had “ethnic” been “cool,” and had “Thai restaurant become staples in very town,” Bich might not have felt such an anxiety.

To make matters worse, she does not have a stable family and a strong cultural background to fall back on. Literally, she does not have a mother to guide her. She has a grandmother, Noi, who cherishes Vietnamese culture and wants to pass it on to her grandchildren. But sadly, Noi does not play any other significant part but to give Bich shelter whenever she needs (later, however, she and her worship of Buddha are the only force that connects the little girl with her origins). Bich’s father cares for nothing and no one but his work in the feather factory and his friends who can booze with him. Bich’s Mexican stepmother, Rosa, is just a stranger who represents another outsider’s culture and whose frugality drives Bich to stealing food from the family refrigerator. Her sisters take sides and kick her out of their world. In other words, Bich has a fractured family that by no means can accommodate her with a comfortable zone in which she can stay away from the “cultural imposition” she feels around herself. As a result, she becomes a silent girl, lacking almost everything she should be entitled to as a child. That lack embodies both the physical and spiritual hunger and exposes the void that needs filling.

Therefore, the protagonist is under a circumstance in which she is completely empty without an identity, and without a stable shelter to fall back on. Meanwhile, around her the imposition of culture is so obvious and powerful. The adaptation is necessary. This again denotes the acute condition of Bich. Coming unprepared and empty like her, she needs to be filled. In the case of *le thi diem thuy* in the second chapter, the writer fills herself with the imagined spaces. Interestingly, in this case, Bich finds what she needs - an identity and a family - in food and chooses to adapt by clinging to the realm of food.

It is the American culture with which she wants to identify herself that urges her to seek American food and regulates her eating. And in the act of picking up an identity through the means of food, she chooses to reject her original Vietnamese heritage. As observed by folklorist Susan Kalcik in her essay “Ethnic Foodways in America: Symbol and the Performance of Identity,” “[f]oodways are an especially significant symbol in the communication of statements about ethnic identity in the United States – about links with ethnicity and denial of it.”⁹⁵ The identity representation that Bich performs goes through a process from comparing and rejecting/denying her Vietnamese cultural heritage, to receiving and finally adapting to American culture. She commences with seeking food - the one thing that can satisfy the need of her body and her soul. She recalls:

At home, I kept opening the refrigerator and cupboards, wishing for American foods to magically appear. I wanted what the other kids had: Bundt cakes and casseroles, Cheetos and Doritos. My secret dream was to bite off just the tip of every slice of pizza in the two-for-one deal we got at Little Caesar’s. The more

⁹⁵ Cited in Ho, *Consumption and identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels*, 55.

American food I ate, the more my desires multiplied, outpacing any interest in Vietnamese food.⁹⁶

So there is a comparison here between American food and Vietnamese food. She does that with an anxiety to experience the world and with the motivation to be like the other kids – to conform. She wants to be part of the crowd that dominates both her outside world (with friends and neighbors) and inside world (with commercials and books). She must have thought that by swallowing the food, she could absorb the culture and could make it hers, or it could make her part of the culture. The American food is new, yes, but its safety is guaranteed by her peers – “the other kids.”

However, it is never an easy process to her. The paradox lies in the competition between the food she has been used to (Vietnamese food) and the food that she needs to eat in order to feel that she belongs. She does make a choice, so that desire for American food “multiplied, outpacing any interest in Vietnamese food.” There is a comparison between the two types of food and she needs to pick one.

It does not stop there though. I see the transformation happening gradually in her from liking American food to detesting her ethnic Vietnamese food. According to Michael Owen Jones, “in social interaction involving food, individuals often make decisions about who they want to appear to be, who they do not want to appear to be, and what the best way to behave is in

⁹⁶ Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, 50.

order to be perceived as they wish.”⁹⁷ Bich does exactly the same thing to achieve her desperate fantasy about becoming “American.” She recalls:

I scowled at almost everything we ate, even Noi’s *pho*, shrimp stews, and curries. I wanted to savor new food, different food, white food. I was convinced I was falling far behind on becoming American, and then what would happen to me? I would be an outcast the rest of my days.⁹⁸

She yearns to transform from being Vietnamese to being American by refusing Vietnamese food, which represents her embarrassing cultural heritage, and embracing “white food,” which represents the dominant culture – the one that she yearns for. In other words, she does not want to be excluded from the mainstream.

The author even carries this further in her observation of her grandmother’s habit of eating and her discovery of how American people eat when her family goes to a Burger King. She observes:

Noi was the holdout. She might go along with us to Burger King, and would even accept a few fries, but her disdain for the place was as visible as the paper crowns Anh and I wore while we ate. Noi had little use for American food. She would have preferred to avoid it completely. But she couldn’t ignore the way I started pushing her beef and onion sautés around my plate. I hadn’t stopped liking her food – *cha gio* and pickled vegetables still held an iron grip on my heart – but now I knew what

⁹⁷ Michael Owen Jones, “Food Choice, Symbolism and Identity: Bread-and-Butter Issues for Folkloristics and Nutrition Studies” *Journal of American Folklore* 476 (October 2005):129-177, 135.

⁹⁸ Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, 52.

real people ate. And in my mind I used that term: *real people*. Real people did not eat *cha gio*. Real people ate hamburgers and casseroles and brownies. And I wanted to be a real person, or at least make others believe that I was one.⁹⁹[italics in-text]

At this point, there is a rejection of her Vietnamese culture because American food to her now becomes a cultural marker that helps her communicate with “real people.” In other words, to use Brown’s idea, American food here bears the traits of “a simple prelinguistic *phenomenon* or a multivalent *sign* coded in language, manners, and rites” (Brown 1984:11) [italics in-text] that will initially help her to feel and to be American.¹⁰⁰ To her, being American is being real people and it has become the means and the ultimate goal in her yearning for being accepted. The void is filled with food and its symbolic meanings, becoming a vehicle of social acceptance, and of cultural invisibility. So, in the act of creating a new identity, she rejects her old Vietnamese self.

Then it comes to the phase when she starts to accept the domination of the new type of food by continuing to seek for it not only in its physical form, but also in its cultural form through the world of commercials and books. In her own world of commercials and books, in which there are plenty of foods and above all depictions of a perfect family, she finds a safe oasis without being aware that she is being led to the matrix of culture imbedded in them. For example, when she reflects on the time of being alone, which most of the time is the case, she writes:

I liked to pile my books around me in bed, moatlike, and sleep among the narratives.

Ramona Quimby, Encyclopedia Brown, The Great Brain, Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle.

Choose Your Own Adventure, Charlie and the Chocolate Factory, Charlotte’s Web,

⁹⁹ Ibid., 56.

¹⁰⁰ Brown, cited by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong in *Reading Asian American Culture* (1993).

The Cay, The Secret Garden, The Chronicles of Narnia. Then writers like Cynthia Voigt, Richard Peck, Norma Fox Mazer. I lingered over my favorite food parts – descriptions of Turkish Delight, fried chicken, hamburgers with onions, thick hot chocolate, even the beef tongue the Quimby family once had for dinner.¹⁰¹ [italics in-text]

Despite the fact that she “linger[s] over [her] favorite food part,” the books she reads are indicators of culture in aspects other than food. Those books are used in schools for education, and hardly any Americans grow up without reading them. So is it food that she is yearning for, or is it the American cultural values embedded in those descriptions that she really wants to reach? After all, reading the books, she realizes how different she is compared to people she meets or characters in the texts. She is not one of them, even the food they eat is not the same as the food she eats at home. Perhaps she is desperate for both – the food and the culture it stands for, because eating American food is not sufficient to Bich. She also wants to master the manner that she observes whenever having a chance to eat with her friends, her neighbors and their families. To Bich, how she should eat is equally important as what she swallow. She wants to be an American “from the inside out.” Indeed, according to Jones:

Not only a food’s physical traits but also an item’s absence at table, the utensils employed to eat it, the cuisine of which it is a part, and who provides the dish in what form may be grist for the mill of symbolization. ... Moreover, the very act of eating conveys meanings. That is, the rules regarding consumption (table manners) comprise “an inventory of symbolic responses that may be manipulated, finessed,

¹⁰¹ Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, 151.

and encoded to communicate messages about oneself”; hence, “you are how you eat” (Cooper 1786:184; see also Bronner 1983:44-55; Siporin 1994; Visser 1991) (137).¹⁰²

Being sensitive and observant, Bich often finds herself amazed at how her white American friend, Holly, behaves when she eats, “I don’t know if she knew how fascinated I was by her impeccable manners – she never spilled, never stumbled, never crumbled paper napkins into balls,” or at her friend’s family, the Jansens, when they “wielded their knives and forks expertly as they carved out bites of pork chop. They dredged each piece in applesauce and deposited the whole into their mouths, never spilling a drop. From there they made the rounds of potatoes and peas, circling back to the pork.”¹⁰³

After observing such a different manner in the people outside her home, she knows that there is something different from the way her family eats. In comparing the two, she recalls:

I thought of weekend afternoons when my family gathered together for Noi’s pho, well simmered with oxtail, onions, and star anise. She prepared each bowl individually, ladling thin slices of beef into the vat of broth until they were just cooked, [and] then releasing them onto a mound of noodles. On the table there were plates piled with herbs, bean sprouts, and lime wedges, jars of hoisin and Sriracha, and a dish of sliced hot chilies. When my father, uncles, and Noi ate pho they leaned in close to the bowls, sniffing deeply to take in the deep, delicate fragrance

¹⁰² Jones, “Food Choice, Symbolism and Identity: Bread-and-Butter Issues for Folkloristics and Nutrition Studies” *Journal of American Folklore* 476 (October 2005):129-177, 157.

¹⁰³ Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, 80.

of the soup. Then they fell to eating, using chopsticks to loop up skeins of noodles and suck them into their mouths, and Chinese spoons slurp the broth. Having dinner with the Jansens, I realized how much noise, how much of a mess, everyone in my family made. We chomped down big mouthful of food, splashed the table and ourselves, snatched sprigs of coriander with our hands. We spiced our soups until our tongues burned, our foreheads glazed with sweat. At the end of the meal my father would go into the kitchen and fish out a beef bone from the bottom of the pot, aiming for every last bit of marrow.¹⁰⁴

Such table manners to her now are unbearable when she knows that “real people” not only eat different things but also eat in a different way. They don’t “lean close to the bowl,” they don’t make a “mess.” In the effort to conform, what used to give her pleasure while eating, what used to be “normal” has to be replaced with a something else, something acceptable. So she tries, “[a]t Holly’s house I picked up the knife and fork, grasping them the way she did. I planted the fork into the graying wedge of meat, making sure I had a good grip.”¹⁰⁵ She failed at her first attempt. However, that failure does not prevent her from trying to do what seems to be impossible despite the pain and the uncomfortable feeling she experiences. The determination carries her through:

In truth I was relieved to be at home again, to have the beef sliced into easy pieces in the salty stew, to see half-inch squares of tofu bobbing in a clear soup. But the lesson hard-learned at Holly’s stayed with me [sic]. I would never endure that panic again. To make sure, I began practicing with a knife and fork. I cut small pieces of

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 52.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 92.

chicken stir-fry into even smaller pieces. I hacked up stalks of bok choy and Chinese broccoli, and curried eggs. At lunch Noi served up the usual ramen, steak and fries, but stopped cutting the meat for me. She didn't say anything about it but left out a knife and fork so I could attack the beef.¹⁰⁶

In short, to use Jennifer Ann Ho's words, "Jean Brillat-Savarin's famous quotation in *The Physiology of Taste*, "Tell me what you eat, and I shall tell you what you are" (3), speaks to the popular belief that human identity and consumption are inseparable."¹⁰⁷ With Bich, the consumption of American food helps her forge an identity that she is always yearning for. She performs the process of consuming thoroughly with a consciousness of not only what to eat but also how to eat in order to achieve her goal – to be in the American culture. And she does that under the pressure to conform. This resonates with Georg Simmel's observation that he made almost a hundred years ago, "Biology determines what people must eat; culture regulates what and how they eat."¹⁰⁸

Indeed, the imposition of culture does play a crucial role in Bich's effort to transform herself from Vietnamese to American - at least in her thought. Elaborative details of food and eating manners, which Bich gives in her text, tell us how significant they are to her. However, as I suggested at the beginning, the hunger for Americanness in Bich also comes from the hunger for a perfect family, especially a mother. That is something she has never had, something she always sees only in the lives of her American friends and neighbors. In other words, it is the

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 93.

¹⁰⁷ Ho, *Consumption and identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels*, 11.

¹⁰⁸ Georg Simmel (trans. Michael Symons), "The Sociology of the Meal [1910]," *Food and Foodways*, V (1994), 345–350; Claude Fischler, "Food, Self, and Identity," *Social Science Information*, XXVII (1988), 275–292.

hunger in the soul of a girl who grows up in a fractured family surrounded with a strange and new culture. The only model she can follow and look up to is that of her American friends. When talking about her friend Holly Jansen's family, for example, she recalls:

Her house rose up two stories, with tan vinyl siding and a prominent two-stall garage in front. Inside was as pristine as the Vander Vals' house and smelled the same – faint reminders of clean laundry, Lysol, and early morning baking. It was apparent that the real mothers in Grand Rapids knew exactly how to run a house, how it should look and smell. They were in on some code that my step mother had been left out of.¹⁰⁹

Yes, a “real mother” is what she does not have. All she has is a step mother, who “can’t possibly be [your] real mom,” as her neighbor once said. What are mothers supposed to do? To her, it is to take care of the children by preparing decent food for them. This is something she always sees at school or at her friends' homes and cannot help making a comparison. For example, when talking about food in the lunchbox her friend, Holly, brings to class, she writes:

I watched as Holly unlatched the Tupperware and drew from it her first course: a sandwich wrapped like a gift in wax paper. Holly's sandwiches were never limp or squashed, battered by books in a schoolbag. They were fresh and white, cut into matching rectangles. Slices of bologna did not hang carelessly over the bread; smudges of peanut butter and jelly did not mar the crust.

...

¹⁰⁹ Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha's Dinner*, 86.

I pictured a spacious kitchen, sunlit and Clorox clean, Mrs. Jansen standing at the counter tucking each lunch component into the Tupperware. Some days, she would slip a little note between the cookies and the thermos. *Hope you're having a great day! Love, Mom.*¹¹⁰

The author somehow always relates food with mother and love. Unfortunately, she does not have what her friends are entitled to because her biological mother does not live with her and does not even exist in her growing up, not to mention making food for her. Rosa, her step mother, embodies nothing other than another strange culture that alienates her every time she is to interact with it. The lunch Rosa prepares for her always is the “cheapest” and gets “smashed before lunch hour.” The girl even has to go to the school cafeteria for lunch, which shows that “your mom obviously didn’t care enough.” Therefore, it can be inferred that the lack of a *real* mother causes both her physical and mental hungers. And thus, there should be a way for her to feel the same as other people, if she cannot have a mother to give her food and what she assumes to have from a mother, she will just try to get it and eat it herself.

As I have suggested in the discussion above, the protagonist picks up food as a means to assimilate under a difficult circumstance. She has to fill up the voids she suffers growing up in a white dominant culture and in a fractured family. However, does that adaptation process happen easily? Can she finally achieve her goal of becoming an American from inside out? What obstacles does she have to face? In the last part of this chapter, I want to bring up the struggles Bich has to go through in filling up her voids to build an identity for herself. After all, what is identity? Is it a gift that someone is born with? Or is that something we can construct or “steal”?

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 78-9.

What should one do with it? Reading Bich's story, I cannot help thinking that she has to struggle not to construct but to "steal" an identity to make it hers.

Many times readers catch her stealing food. She does that so often at home, and finally even at her neighbor's. How should we interpret that without relating it to the voids she needs to fill up? In my opinion, she starts with only emptiness, and with so little to fall back on with a fractured family, a vague conception of what her original culture is and feeling of loss in the dominant culture. Her misery is worse when she finds no legitimacy in integrating in either Vietnamese or American culture, because of different reasons. Vietnamese culture to her is a source of embarrassment, and American culture is not designated for her. Therefore, she has to "steal." She remembers one of the many times when she really yearns for being a part of the crowd:

The closer Holly and I became, the more I wanted to be like her. On the day of the sleepover I felt light-headed with nervousness; I was terrified of disappointing her, of making a mistake that would show the low errors of my upbringing and very self. Looking in the mirror every morning before school I wondered why I could not be transformed. If only my hair, at the very least, would cooperate and look like Holly's, bending into a soft curl at the shoulder. Instead my hair fell bluntly, as if cleaver-chopped, laced with wintertime static.¹¹¹

Noting the "double edged" nature of identity formation, literary critic Sheng-mei Ma posits that identity "[o]n the one hand, []implies subjectivity which stems partly from the human agent or self-will; on the other, it suggests being subjected to a system beyond one's control or even

¹¹¹ Ibid., 87.

consciousness.”¹¹² Bich wants to be American. However, along with the hunger for an American identity, there is also a constant awareness of the difference in her Vietnamese appearance from that of her Caucasian friend who represents the image of a “real American.” As Jennifer Ann Ho observes, “Race maybe a social construct, but the ability of Asian Americans to create their own identities is always bound by both terms of their subject position in America. They can choose to identify as American, but their Asian phenotype will always make them vulnerable to dominant conceptions of who they are.”¹¹³ Such a hunger for being like other people, a hunger that cannot be satisfied legitimately because of that “vulnerable identity” she can represent, turns into a drive for stealing, the stealing of an identity. The stealing is symbolically done through the realm of food. For instance, Bich recounts how she feels after her apology for breaking into Jennifer’s house and stealing the cookies:

My apology to Jennifer had been for her room. No one had noticed the missing of the cookies, and my sister and I had said nothing. As I pedaled toward Sienna Street I cherished that secret. I knew the cookies would stay with me forever, echoing with each successive one I might eat and learn to make, each chocolate chip a reminder of the toll, the price of admission into a long-desired house. How I wanted such entrance through cookies, through candies and cake, popsicles, ice cream, endless kinds of dinner. I wanted a lot of it, and hated to be hungry.¹¹⁴

¹¹² Sheng-mei Ma, *Immigrant Subjectivities in Asian American and Asian Diaspora Literatures* (Albany: University of New York Press, 1998), 7.

¹¹³ Ho, *Consumption and identity in Asian American Coming-of-Age Novels*, 14.

¹¹⁴ Nguyen, *Stealing Buddha’s Dinner*, 71.

Bich in her effort to forge an identity for herself has stolen, consumed, and internalized what she thinks might help her with the constant hunger for it. She wants to be fulfilled, to be recognized, and to be socially accepted. However, that consumption, that internalization of the American culture never seems to help because eating the food does not make her become American from the inside out, which she is aware of when it comes to other cultural aspects. For example, when she talks about religion, she observes:

As I sat in the Vander Wals' tree, Christianity seemed about as real as Agapaopolis. It seemed as distant from my person as blond hair and blue eyes. It also seemed manipulative, what with all the fire and hell. When Jennifer talked about the Lord it was with equal parts of love and fear. Noi didn't fear, or even really love, Buddha. She didn't worship him; she gave him her respect.¹¹⁵

This is one of the many critical moments when the voice of her Vietnamese heritage in the back talks to her, telling her that she can never be a Christian, just as she can never literally become someone with blond hair and blue eyes, and ultimately she will never be an American from inside out. It also manifests the dilemma in her heart as an immigrant whether to blend in or remain apart. She realizes that after all she is just like the plum she steals from her grandma's Buddha shrine with the "contrast of the yellow flesh, limned with the scarlet underside of the skin." That is a self with everlasting conflicts, a self with constant struggle, an identity without stability or consistency. After all the eating of American food, has she been able to establish for herself an identity? The answer lies somewhere in the realm of in-between-ness. To me, this represents the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American in a perfect way. The feeling of both

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 195.

belonging and non-belonging is constantly at play in the everlasting struggle to find a place for one's self. Perhaps one can argue that all immigrants feel it, but I posit that the 1.5 generation feels that most intensely.

In conclusion, food in *Stealing Buddha's Dinner* is deployed by Bich Minh Nguyen as a metaphor for an American identity. In narrating her hunger for American food, her seeking, her stealing and her consuming the food, Nguyen vividly tells us her bittersweet memories as a little girl searching for an identity and a family that she yearns for. Food in her memoir manifests itself as a means for adaptation, and for identity representation. Food, with its cultural significance that the author assigns to, plays the role of an identity determiner. Food is also the symbol of a stable family associated with a real mother that she needs. In the process of trying to consume American food in order to forge an American identity for her self, however, the protagonist struggled hard only to realize that she could never really become an American by eating American food, and that she could never achieve the insider invisibility she yearned for so desperately. The voids are still there to be filled.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the three memoirs by authors of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American shows that there are similarities and differences among them in the adapting process. It also allows for a better understanding of what really happens in their effort to survive and to be accepted by the dominant American culture.

The authors started with a lot of commonalities. They all came to the U.S. as refugees with somewhat traumatic experiences during the war in Vietnam and in their flee to America. These experiences, to some extent, are considered as a cultural heritage, one that some of them try to embrace; while others try to forget. Thus, the experiences _ no matter what they mean to each author _ play a crucial role in the process of representing their identity in the new world. They also have to struggle to reach one ultimate goal – to find their voices, and above all, their identity over the heritage they carried to the new land. The analysis shows that most members of the 1.5 generation started with many deep voids that need filling. Those are voids that derive from different losses in their lives depending on each individual. Some lost a brother, some a mother, and some a sense of belonging. However, I find them similar in their effort to fill the voids – they all have to struggle in their choices between the old and the new, between past and present, and between their Vietnamese cultural heritage and the dominant American values. Unfortunately, in that struggle, almost none of them finds satisfaction. Anh Vu Sawyer in *Song of Saigon* decided to choose both, and thus put herself in the state of in-between-ness. le thi diem thuy in *The Gangster We Are All Looking For* contended with avoiding reality and seeking for refuge in her imagination instead, and thus failed to cope with reality. Bich Minh Nguyen in

Stealing Buddha's Dinner preferred to be a real American but could not fulfil her yearning, and thus ended up in desperation. In this sense, their struggles are constant ones; struggles that do not resolve any of their inner conflicts, but confine them in a liminal space between two thresholds, between two borders of the two cultures. This very state constitutes the crucial characteristic of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American – they do not really belong to either Vietnamese or American culture for the several reasons I have mentioned above. They are in between. In other words, they metaphorically play the role of a bridge between the two cultures.

While the analysis shows how much they share in common, it also demonstrates that they differ in many ways, which basically relates to their refugee condition under which they came to the U.S. The condition pretty much determines their choices of strategies to represent their identity.

Coming from a higher class family in Vietnam, Anh Vu Sawyer arrived in the new land as an anticipatory refugee with some preparation. Her experiences, as a result, are somehow less traumatic than the other two authors. This is well-reflected in the way the writer thematically and temporally constructs her memoir. The theme of religion is deployed as a way to explain the conversion to Christianity by her grandfather and the conversion from Vietnamese to American by herself. This deployment of the theme denotes an earlier exposure to American culture of the protagonist, which paves way for an easier adaptation process. The conversion processes took place in a smoother way which can also be inferred from the linear timeline throughout her text.

Meanwhile, le thi diem thuy and Bich Minh Nguyen do not have that same comfort due to their lower family background. They both came to the U.S. as acute refugees and had to face a harsh reality without preparation, which is shown clearly in their life writings. If Vu's religion is

Christianity, Nguyen's is American food. Vu can embrace and be proud of her family's background, le finds hers a source of embarrassment and refuses to deal with it. The disruptive timeline utilized by le and Nguyen also tells us the disorderliness, the chaos and the difficulties they went through in the whole process.

All of those give a vivid and diverse picture of the group as a whole.

The study helps me find the answers to the many questions I started with regarding the plight to/in the U.S. of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American. Unlike the common belief of people in Vietnam, Vietnamese refugees in America, especially the 1.5 generation do not always enjoy an easy life. They did, are and will have to struggle to survive and, above all, to be recognized. They are constantly aware of the co-existence of the two cultures, Vietnamese and American; they are conditioned to carry on being in the middle. This helps explain the ways they choose to represent their identities through their life writings. They use American English as a means to express themselves. However, the language does not make them American because it is used to write texts about their lives whose Vietnamese origin cannot be denied.

As far as unanswered questions are concerned, during the research process, I realized that all the authors whose works I randomly chose to analyze in this study are female, which poses another question that needs addressing. How does gender affect the way one's identity is represented? In other words, how different the outcome of this project would be if all the authors were male? Another question that arises in the process is how about the 1st and the 2nd generation of Vietnamese American? How different they are in the way they represent their identities in comparison with the 1.5 generation? At the same time, I started out with a question about how the 1.5 generation and their identity representation might be different from the other Asian

American population and have not been able to answer. It can be inferred that other Asian American groups such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean-Americans have been in the U.S. for a much longer period, and most of them did not suffer from wars. That can result in a less intense and less traumatic adaptation. However, more work should be done in order to arrive at a precise conclusion. All of these questions are necessary to address in order to have a better understanding of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American.

In terms of methodology, given the nature of literary analysis, I cannot help inserting my personal and subjective interpretation in reading the texts. On the one hand, it helps me engaged with my study subject. On the other hand, this approach does not yield completely objective observations, which creates obstacles for any effort to make a generalization. For future research, I believe that ethnographical methodology with the use of interviews along with literary analysis will produce accountable knowledge of the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American.

In conclusion, this study has partly filled the gap in scholarships on Vietnamese Americans. In particular, it gives an insight into how the 1.5 generation of Vietnamese American represent their identity through their life writings. It also shows patches of lives of individuals in the group throughout the process of adaptation, which helps us see this generation as very unique and diverse.

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